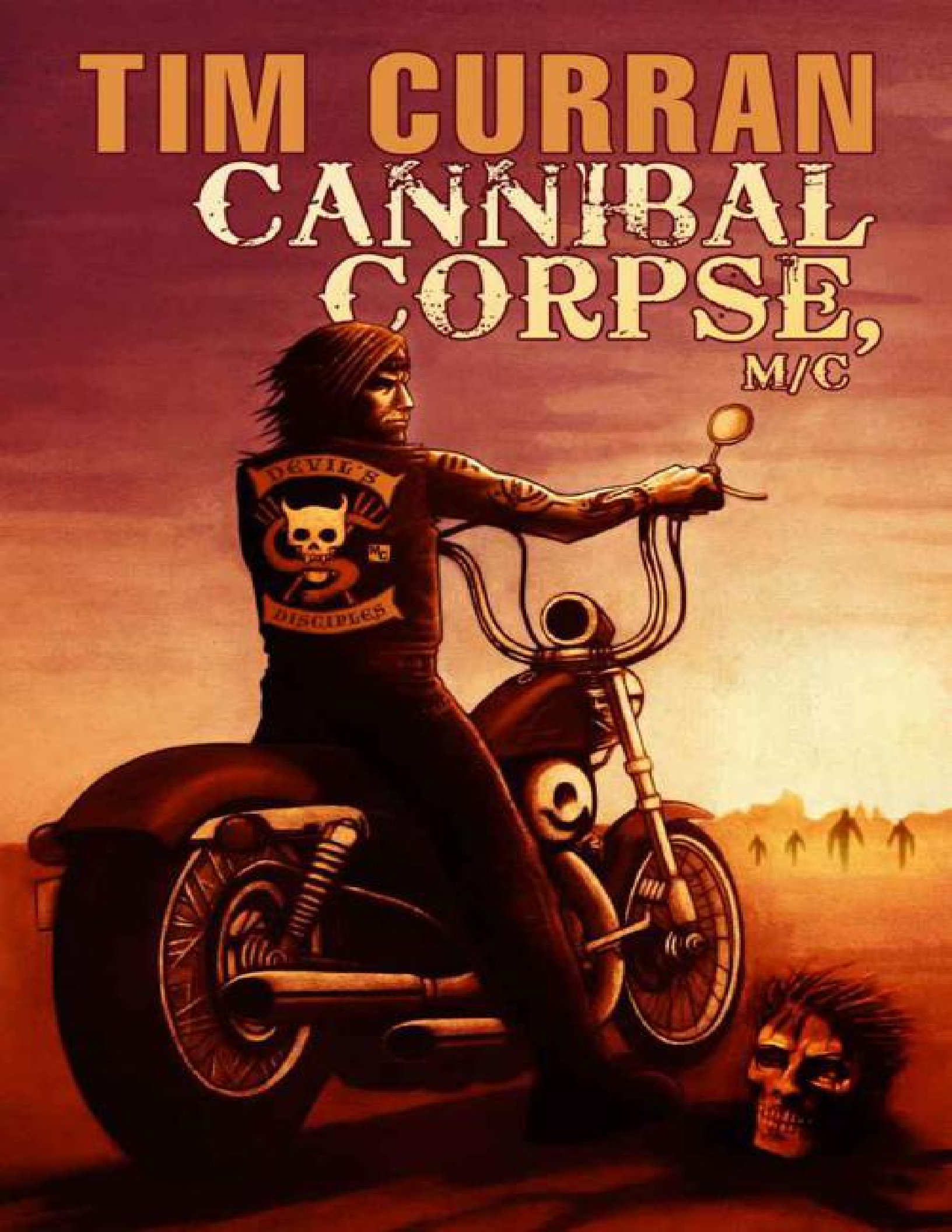
TIM CURRAN

CANNIBAL CORPSE, M/C



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Tim Curran

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“Only the dead are without fear.”
—Tomas, *The Magnificent Seven* (1960)

Chapter One

The wormboy cut in close, trying to sideswipe him, but Slaughter was ready: he brought out the big .357 Combat Mag and let it bark a couple of times. It was like thunder in the still air. The first round went wild, the other right on target. The wormboy cried out as the side of his throat was blasted to hamburger. He flipped off the shit-brown Duo-Glide Panhead, and hit the pavement, skidding on his face and leaving a greasy smear on the road. His bike went careening away, flipping over, spinning away in a shower of sparks.

Slaughter circled him, bringing his hog to a stop.

He hopped off, a tall wiry man in a greasy, road-weary jean vest emblazoned with club patches, his bare muscular arms sleeved with prison tattoos. He wore a black bandanna on his head and steel-toed motorcycle boots. On the back of his vest there was an oval logo patch with a horned deathshead over crossed pitchforks, a snake hanging from the fanged jaws. Above it, the top rocker read: DEVIL'S DISCIPLES, M/C. And below it: PITTSBURGH.

"Let's finish this," Slaughter said.

The wormboy didn't stay down dead, of course, but scrambled to his feet, his graying worm-holed face contorted in a mask of anger. He pressed one gnarled, fleshless hand to his wounded throat, trying to stem the flow of black bile which passed for blood in the walking dead.

He made a low growling sound like a kicked dog, gnashing yellow teeth together, anxious to sink them into something warm and pink and full-blooded.

Slaughter put another round in his chest, then planted a third right between his eyes before he could pull the SS dagger in his belt. The contents of the wormboy's skull sprayed across the road. He folded up, dropped to his knees, and hit the pavement face-first. As an afterthought, he

shuddered and vomited out a slime of green drainage. There were maggots in it.

“Fucking wormboys,” Slaughter said under his breath, spitting tobacco juice into the ruined, blood-speckled face.

But it wasn’t done and he knew it.

He pulled his Gurkha knife from the black leather sheath at his belt and went to it. The *Kukri,* as it was known, had an 18” curved blade that was sharp enough to shave with. Hardcore outlaw bikers—1%ers—called it a *Ginsu,* and with good reason. Like some kind of deadly hybrid between a knife and an axe, you could slice a tomato clean or de-limb a tree with it.

But that wasn’t what Slaughter was going to de-limb.

He hacked off first the right arm, then the left. He hacked through both legs and then decapitated the wormboy. It was nasty, dirty work. And when he was done, there was blood right up to his bicep and spattered over his face. He got a towel out of his bag and wiped the rancid blood clean, polishing the Gurkha knife to a lethal gleam before sliding it back in its sheath.

Satisfied, he walked over to the wormboy’s remains.

The arms were still moving, fingers clawing.

There was still life in the head. Glazed, yellow-white eyes stared up at him; the teeth gnashed.

Slaughter kicked the head and it rolled into the gravel.

He fired up a cigarette and waited there, crouched by the side of the road.

The wormboy was dead, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t anything still alive *inside* him. And there it came, right out of the left eye socket: a twelve-inch segmented worm, glossy red and shiny with brain goo. It deserted the head like a rat leaving a sinking ship, slithering off in search of better pickings. Although it couldn’t see much better than your average brick—didn’t have any eyes—it knew where Slaughter was. It sensed him. Smelled him. Picked up his body heat, *something.* It raised its ugly bulbous knob of a head in defense. The head opened up like a flower, the worm heaved, and let fly with a stream of brown juice.

Slaughter ducked away from it.

He didn’t know what that shit was, but it had a weird narcotic effect like getting shot up with a Thorazine cocktail. You got hit and you were done. Within seconds, you were down on your knees, your limbs rubbery and

ungainly, your eyes glazed over. And once you were nicely numb and doped, the worm would pay you a visit, slide right in anywhere you were open—nose, mouth, eyes, ass…they weren't picky. After that, death came within six hours and within twelve, you woke back up with a real nasty appetite for human flesh.

There were stories making the rounds that junkies were squeezing out worms for juice, cutting it with heroin and coke and shooting it. Maybe it was bullshit, maybe not.

Slaughter crouched there, smoking, thinking of eighth grade American Lit. They all had to memorize a poem and old fat ass Mrs. Buntz gave him Poe's *The Conqueror Worm.* Crazy shit, but he could still remember it, still hear those words running through his head:

But see, amid the mimic rout
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!- it writhes!- with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,
And seraphs sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued.

"Yeah," he said, blowing smoke out through his nostrils. "Dig it."

It was still fresh in his mind and never had those words made sense like they did now. The point of the poem was about human mortality, he knew, about people carrying on like death was not a solid, grim inevitability when in fact its shadow was cast over every living thing from the point of birth. For in the end the worm conquers all.

"The play is a tragedy and it's called 'Man'," he paraphrased. "And its hero is the conqueror worm." He stood up. "But you won't conquer shit today, my friend." He stomped the worm to paste, looking down that lonely stretch of highway snaking away through the green Wisconsin hills towards Minnesota. Somewhere out there was the great Mississippi and on the other side, the Deadlands. Like the name implied, the Deadlands was a great wild wasteland of roving gangs, scavengers, nomads and mutants, and the walking dead that stretched clear to the Pacific Ocean. The cities out there were cemeteries and the towns were tombs. Some of that was from the

Outbreak itself and some of it was from the ten megaton nukes used to contain it. Deadly clouds of fallout and radioactive dust storms were still blowing around out there, people said. Back east, things were secure. After the Outbreak—the worm infestation that brought the dead up out of their graves—and the wars that followed, the military had reorganized and launched one cleanup op after another until nearly all the zombies were exterminated. You got west of Pennsylvania, then it was the Wild West all over again. The frontier. The politicians kept saying that the army would continue the cleanup, pushing ever westward, but as things stood, the army had enough problems securing the east.

Which was just fine with Slaughter.

He was out in Wisconsin now because it was lawless. Out here, the dead walked, psychos and paramilitary whackos would kill you for your guns, your women, or a can of fucking pork-n-beans. But that was okay. As a blood member of the Devil's Disciples and a veteran of countless biker wars, he understood killing and attrition and the politics of survival just fine. Out here, Darwinism was law and he fit right in.

Besides, he was wanted on three counts of capital murder back east and was currently the only member of the Devil's Disciples living fancy free. The others were either dead or in prison.

He finished his cigarette and flicked it in the ditch, longing for the good old days when you patched with a good club, pushed some blow and crank, took to the road on your steel horse with your brothers, and your enemy stayed down dead when you shot him.

Those were the days.

Rumbling with the Pagans in Maryland and the Outlaws in Chicago, blood wars with the Angels and Mongols in California, nothing but pussy and booze and blood.

Lots of turf battles. Ugly affairs to be sure, but at least they were *men* fighting against *men.* Ever since the worm rains, it wasn't the same for the 1%ers. Pickings were thin, the old boys were all dead, and there were things walking that should have moldered in graves long ago.

Kicking the wormboy's body a few times, Slaughter scavenged the corpse, taking the SS dagger from the torso. It was deadly sharp. He used it to slit the wormboy's colors from the back of the filthy leather vest. He held them up into the sun. A white jawless skull, fanged, set in a field of red, one socket empty the other with a staring bloodshot eye. The upper rocker read:

CANNIBAL CORPSE, M/C. And beneath the skull, the lower said: KANSAS CITY.

He stuffed them in his road bag.

He had taken the colors off a dozen of them in the past three days.The farther west you got, the wilder things were. Back in the day, Slaughter remembered, the Devil's Disciples had gone to gun against the Cannibal Corpse Nation. It had been violent, bloody warfare right from the first, a drug war, a turf war, riders and soldiers on both sides gunned down, beaten, stabbed, strangled, burned. Clubhouses blown up, chapter presidents and officers assassinated. The Outbreak had brought a cessation of hostilities, though. And that was the funny part, when you came down to it. *Cannibal Corpse*. They all died when Kansas City and St. Louis got dusted by tactical neutron weapons, but the worms brought them back so that in death they were what they claimed to be in life.

Slaughter went over to his bike.

He figured he'd better get back to the farm. Dirty Mary, his old lady of the moment, was probably waiting for him. He'd gone out on a run to do some scavenging and found an untouched case of Dinty Moore beef stew. Mary was going to like that.

The problem was that Slaughter was already feeling restless.

Dirty Mary was all right, but the road was calling to him and he wanted to ride, keep going west, right into the black heart of the Deadlands. The longer he sat still the more he could feel the walls of his cage narrowing even further. It had been like that ever since he was a teenager. He had to keep moving, keep doing something or he got bored and crazy after awhile. The longer he sat still in one place, the more he envisioned a gallows being built in his mind, boards being nailed into place and a noose strung from a scaffold. And he knew it was his noose and when he started seeing it, when it got into his dreams and laid a chill along his spine, he knew it was time to move.

He jumped on the hog and opened her up down the road.

Something to the west was calling to him, but he couldn't hear the voice yet.

But soon…

Chapter Two

Slaughter's scoot was a stripped-down, night-black Harley FLHTC with a hardtail frame, straight drag pipes, and a high compression ironhead stroker. She was loud as hell and could be heard rumbling a mile away, but she was fast and maneuverable, and when you were in her saddle, she had plenty of meat.

He shot down the I just outside Black River Falls, rode the clutch, and cut onto the county trunk which was more gravel than pavement, potholed and rough. It cut through the green hills of western Wisconsin and sometimes, when you were high enough, you could see Minnesota out there to the west, hilly and mist-choked like some fairy tale never-never land. In Slaughter's mind, it was beginning to take on that kind of mythic quality: it was west, west into the Deadlands and that's where he wanted to go and where it would happen…whatever *it* was.

Back roads like this…open fields, clustered thickets, deep-cut ravines… it reminded him of the old days when he was chapter president of the Pittsburgh Devil's Disciples and he took the pack out on a road run.

He was thinking about Dirty Mary.

If he went west, she'd want to tag along because that's the kind of girl she was. She was a veteran biker bitch for sure, a long-time club lady, fast with her mouth, good with a knife, slick and mean. But under all that she was weak. She was terrified of being alone. Slaughter figured that if he was going, he'd have to ditch her in the middle of the night. He knew Dirty Mary didn't love him any more than he loved her. They were in it together for bonding, for protection, for sex. That's how it worked. You stripped that away and they were barely friends. The first time he hooked up with her outside Milwaukee, she'd tried to put a knife into him.

It was that kind of relationship.

The sex was good—rough, raw, violent—but that's all there was. Slaughter scavenged for food and Dirty Mary cooked it up, he protected her and she took care of him. They got it on, but they could barely stand to be in the same room together. She liked to tell him he wasn't as smart as Jibb, her last old man, a sergeant-at-arms for the Warlocks out of Florida, and he liked to tell her she couldn't cook or give head like Joseline could, his ex who had died back in Scranton.

Fun, fun, fun.

There was a diabolic chemistry between them and he could feel it bubbling in him like acid whenever they were together and not slapping skin. Like belladonna and mandrake root mixed, real poison, venom seething and hissing and looking for lives to take. And it was going to happen. Sooner or later, that evil temper of Mary's was going to piss him off and he was going to hurt her or she was going to slit his throat while he slept.

Blood was most definitely in the offing.

He rumbled up a tree-lined hill, waiting for a break in the foliage because when it opened he could see the farm down there in the hollow and he would breathe easier. He always breathed easier when he saw it. Like home sweet home, dig it, made him feel relaxed. That was, until he got in the door and Mary and he started going at it, dosing each other on hate and circling one another like mad dogs.

Jesus.

Slaughter shook his head. *What kind of fucking life is that? What kind of shit is that to be—*

What the hell?

He was grannying the hog in low gear, moving slow and easy, when the trees parted and the bushes squatted down and he could see little home sweet home down there. Barn, silo, farmhouse, all knitted up in yellow late-summer fields like a shawl.

He brought the hog to a stop, then rolled it beneath the overhanging branches of a big oak. He hopped off and peered down into the hollow. There were two pick-up trucks parked down there, and when he'd left three hours before to eat some road there had been no trucks of any sort. So either Dirty Mary had made some new friends—Slaughter found that hard to believe—or she was in a spot.

He figured the latter.

He went back to his bike and loaded the Combat Mag, slid it in the Army web belt holster, and strapped it on. He scanned the farmyard below, figuring how he was going to do this. He should have been scared and he knew it. But with the life he'd led and how goddamned pent-up and bored he'd been for weeks now, this was escape. This was a kick. This was getting into the shit and getting in deep.

He moved down the hillside smoothly, going down into a crouch and crab-crawling his way through the yellow grass of the orchard until he got amongst the old crabapple trees and got himself some camo. He waited a few moments to see if anyone was on the watch for him.

Nothing.

"All right," he said under his breath. "Let's light this shit up."

Crouching again, he moved from cover to the silo, stepping easy to the barn and waiting, his heart thumping in his throat. But it wasn't fear. It was exhilaration. It was excitement. Man, it was like the old days creeping up on a Cannibal Corpse clubhouse to throw some lead around and bust some heads.

He edged around the barn, smelling the pure Wisconsin air. Sweet and fresh. You had to love it. *There*. He saw a guy standing out near the back door having a smoke. Just a kid. He was dressed in Army-issue camo fatigues which marked him either as a member of the Red Hand of Freedom, a paramilitary terrorist sect that had splintered from the regular Army during the Outbreak, or just some dipshit hanging with another G.I. Joe combo.

Didn't much matter; Slaughter was going to take him out.

Kid just stood there, leaning up against the wall. He had a rifle with him, looked like an old M-1. Like him, it was just leaning there. Kid wasn't much of a sentry and Slaughter figured he hadn't trained down in Fort Bragg.

Slaughter moved around his blindside and slipped up behind him and it was so fucking easy he thought for one moment maybe it was a trap and the kid was laid out as bait. The kid just kept smoking, not a care in the world. He made a slight grunting noise when Slaughter quickly took him by the hair, yanked his head back and put the SS dagger against his carotid.

"Move and I slit your throat," he told him.

The kid didn't move other than the shaking that went through his limbs. Slaughter slid the knife against his Adam's apple, wondering if he should

just do him or get some intel from him. He decided on the latter. Kid couldn't have been more than nineteen, just a cherry. He had green eyes like a crystal deep pond. Naïve. Innocent. Slaughter figured if it hadn't been for the Outbreak, kid would probably have been the high school track star with those long legs of his. But fate had changed all that. No track, no school, no copping a feel down Mary Jane's pants in the back of his Camaro.

Every time he made to open his mouth, Slaughter pressed the knife up a little tighter.

"C'mon…man," the kid finally breathed, "don't kill me…please don't kill me."

"Tell me what happened here."

"I don't know…*ah.*.."

Slaughter pressed the dagger in until it tasted blood, just piercing the skin of the kid's throat.

"You get one more chance."

"We…we came down the road, pulled in here and this crazy bitch started shooting at us, screaming names at us."

Slaughter smiled. Yeah, that was Dirty Mary, all right.

"Who are *we?"*

"Red Hand, man. If you're smart you'll just let me go and get out of here. There's some pretty bad dudes in that house."

"Ratbags," Slaughter said, which was the general term for members of the Red Hand of Freedom.

The kid scowled.

"They having their fun with the woman?"

"No…not yet. But I think they're going to take her with."

"No shit?"

"Like I said, man…we're the Hand, we're fucking Red Hand. You don't wanna fuck with us."

"Who's your leader? What's the puke's name?"

"Snake," the kid said. "They call him Snake."

Slaughter considered it. "How many?"

"Five."

"Six with you."

"Sure."

Slaughter already had the kid figured for a screamer, but he decided out of the goodness of his black little heart that he was going to be

compassionate today.

“Okay, kid. I’m going to let you live. When I take the knife away, you run. You run out into the field. You run up that hillside. You keep running and running and you never come back. That sound fair?”

“Sure.”

Slaughter sighed, pulled the knife away and right away the kid scrambled towards the door, calling, *“Mike! Rich! He—”*

But by then Slaughter had him and he slit his throat with one quick slash. The kid hit the dirt, gagging out blood and trembling in the grass. He didn’t tremble long.

Slaughter took his rifle and moved along the side of the house, he ducked under windows until he began to hear voices. They were in the living room and Dirty Mary was really giving it to them. Slaughter peeked through the corner of the window. She was in a chair. There was blood on her face like she’d been hit. The Ratbags were gathered around her, but not too close. Mary’s shirt was torn and one of her breasts was hanging out. Not that such a thing would bother her, he knew. She liked to flash them like a cop flashed his tin. She had a lot of stories about getting thrown out of bars for showing them around so people could appreciate the inking she had on them.

Yeah, she was some kind of girl.

The Ratbags were probably thinking on raping her, but they didn’t know Dirty Mary. She liked to hand it out like candy at Halloween, you didn’t have to take it by force. But if they did, if those sorry shits put the moves on her…man, were they in for something. In close, Dirty Mary was a real animal with her nails and teeth. And that wasn’t even counting the razor she kept in her belt.

Slaughter decided he’d let it play out a bit, see what happened.

He figured it would be good.

Chapter Three

He'd met Dirty Mary at a roadhouse outside Milwaukee called Angelz, a hardcore biker bar where the juke played renegade country and hard rock and the clientele were all patched members of various clubs who wore their colors proudly. Most of the clubs had been decimated by the Outbreak and the resultant blood wars, but there were still some pretty mean cliques in there—the Outlaws and Highwaymen, Grim Reapers and Blood Brothers, even a few Vagos from California that had headed east to avoid the trouble west of the Mississippi.

The beauty of Angelz was that it was solid road warriors and street-eaters, no RUBs—Rich Urban Bikers—or weekenders on their Honda or Yamaha rice rockets. No wannabes or pretenders, only the real thing: blood members of various clubs along with their prospects, supporters, and hang-arounds. Lots of tough biker bitches and plenty of sheep making the scene, flashing their titties and shaking their asses. Nothing else. The police didn't bother going there because these days they had enough trouble without trying to roust seventy or eighty juiced-up bikers.

Slaughter had gone in there, picking his way west, needing to get away from the citizens and the John Laws which had his number and wanted to put him away. He wore his Devil's Disciples colors and he knew a lot of people from the other clubs. The booze was flowing and the boys were snorting coke and meth right off the bar and challenging anyone to mention the fact. Slaughter chatted with some old friends, got his beak wet, and watched the shit hit the fan because the moment he walked in there, he knew it would…and it *did.*

Hard to say whose buttons got pushed first, but a Vago and a Reaper got into a punch-up and pretty soon a dozen others were drawn into it, and it became increasingly brutal as knives and shanks, chains and broken bottles found their way into hands. Pretty soon you had blood and broken faces,

stab wounds and fractured limbs, bleeding skulls and boys spitting out their teeth.

Slaughter stayed out of it for the most part.

That was until some 300 pound maniac from the Blood Brothers—eyes like white diamonds from all the meth he'd been spiking—came at him with a bloodied chair leg. Slaughter stepped under his swing and kneed him in rapid succession in the balls and belly and then gouged his knuckles into the Brother's eyes, burying them in there and twisting them with a violent motion while the man went down screaming. A boot to the head finished the job and as Slaughter did that, turning to see if any more action was coming his way, the woman he'd come to know as Dirty Mary came at him with a hunting knife. She went at him like a panther out of a cage, smelling blood. He got the knife away from her, slapped her down…then another big boy from the Reapers slammed into them and knocked them both under a table which took them out of the fight.

But Dirty Mary wasn't done.

She fought under Slaughter with teeth and nails, burning hot and turned on from the blood and action, so he shoved her aside. She came right back for more so he gave her what she wanted right there under the table and when she came she bit into his shoulder and drew blood.

So that was their first date—dark, sleazy, and smarmy, like a five-dollar peep show.

When the soldiers started dragging their club brothers off, Slaughter told her, "My scoot's outside. Be on it."

"Fuck I will," she said.

But five minutes later they were choppering down the highway and Dirty Mary was holding onto him tight and pressing her breasts into him and he knew he had an old lady.

* * *

The first night together they spent in an abandoned motel just outside Sun Prairie. There were people—real, living people—in the town itself, but that's not what Slaughter wanted. He tolerated zombies only slightly less than he tolerated citizens with their rules and laws and hang-ups. The deserted motel was fine. They had a suite with a fireplace and plenty of logs

to feed it. After they killed a bottle of wine and got it on proper, they lay there in bed watching the firelight reflected on the walls.

“So tell me about it,” Slaughter said. “Lay it all on me.”

“Jibb,” she said. “You mean Jibb? My old man?”

“Sure. If that’s what you want.”

“He was a mean dude.”

“I bet.”

“He was. He was sergeant-at-arms and he broke a lot of heads and kicked a lot of ass.” Dirty Mary let that lay like it was the best epitaph she could come up with or the only one that Jibb might have appreciated. “He was tough and he was smart. Then he got funny.”

“Yeah?”

“He started getting religious. He’d been through so many scraps and wars and hardtime lock-ups and never came out of any of it with much more than a scratch. He started thinking he was God’s chosen son.”

Slaughter laughed and Dirty Mary swung on him. He had to fight her back down and tell her he didn’t mean anything by it. In the firelight, her big breasts were all he could see besides her shining snake eyes. He wanted her again right then but he figured he’d better listen to what she had to say.

So he smoked and tried to keep his mouth shut.

“He really did,” Dirty Mary said. “He thought he was God’s chosen son. And once he started believing that, there was no talking sense to him. He was crazier than before. Meaner. He thought he was ten-feet tall and bulletproof, man. You know?”

“Yeah.”

“That was about the time of the Outbreak. People were dying, and a lot of ‘em were rising back up. Jibb decided it was his personal mission to kill zombies being that he was God’s chosen and they were things from hell. So he killed them. All day long he killed them. Day after day.”

“And then?”

She sighed and he could see the tears glistening in her eyes. “Then, one night, he got caught in a worm rain. He could have made it to cover. That’s what Stumpy, his club brother, told me. But Jibb didn’t believe the worms could touch him. Well, he was fucking wrong, wasn’t he?”

Slaughter could see it playing out in his mind. Jibb, all messed-up with a fucking messiah complex, thinking he was invincible when he was only just crazy and deluded. Lot of ‘em got like that, though. People would stand out

in the worm rains laughing. Christian fundamentalist congregations would do the same, acting like it was some kind of baptismal or putting the might of their god against the one that made the worms. In the end, it was always the same—they came out of their graves looking for something to chew on, usually their friends and neighbors. He figured it was probably the same with Jibb.

"I was there when he came back," Dirty Mary said, lancing a sore of memory and letting the bad blood run. "It was three days after the funeral. The man was saying all bodies had to be burned…remember that? But they didn't enforce it. Not then. Not at the beginning. Not like they did later when the dudes in the white bio-suits came with guns and *took* the dead."

She said that for the first two nights, Stumpy and some of the other Warlocks and their old ladies stayed with her in case something happened and they had to sort out Jibb. But after a few days and he didn't come back, they figured it was cool. Then the first night she was alone, he was at the door.

"It was the middle of the night, man, the dead of night," she told Slaughter. "It was a weird night. Kind of warm with a hot wind blowing, dogs were barking. I heard the front door jiggle and I thought, oh, it's gotta be one of the Warlocks, probably Stumpy had a load on and needed somewhere to crash. Maybe he was looking for a piece of ass. You know how the brothers get sometimes…"

She said she went to the door and was about to call out to whoever was out there when she felt something go right up her spine. The knob was turning. She'd forgotten to lock it. It wasn't the first time, but when your old man was sergeant-at-arms of a 1%er club, you didn't worry much about locked doors. But Jibb was dead and somebody was coming in and she had a pretty good idea of who it might be.

The door opened and Jibb was standing there. "Daddy's home," he said.

"I backed away. I screamed. All I remember is the clump-clump-clump of his motorcycle boots. We buried him in his rags, his colors, and they just hung on him…Jibb was a big guy and by then he was only a big corpse, like a skeleton wearing skin. His face was white and blotchy, and there were maggots in his hair and beard. His eyes were all red like they were filled with blood or maybe something worse. I got this real perverse idea, man, that he hadn't come home just to put his teeth in me but to get me in bed, to do things like we used to do." She broke off for a moment, breathing really

hard. “He said he was going to eat me. He said he was going to start with my pussy and work his way up. There was green slime coming out of his mouth and cockroaches—I think they were cockroaches—coming out of holes in his face. He smelled like death, man. Like roadkill. Dirt fell from him as he walked, and he was grinning like a sewer grate. I did the only thing I *could* do, and took up his .44 Magnum from the kitchen drawer and I shot him. I shot him right in the chest and that fucking .44 almost broke my wrist with the recoil. Jibb made a growling sound and came at me so I shot him in the head the way Stumpy had told me to. Jibb shook and squirmed, the top of his head gone…then he dropped to his knees and vomited out this black bile that looked like crude oil. Then he fell over and he was dead again. He was still grinning, man.”

Slaughter held her tight and she trembled. She had opened her soul to him and that night he really loved her. It didn’t last, of course, but that night he really loved her because she was open and vulnerable and no woman had ever needed him so much. He held her as she shook, listening to the wind howling out in the deserted lot, the rain speckling the windows. After a time she calmed and she wanted him again or maybe she *needed* him, needed something physical and exhausting that would wipe the slate of her mind clean the way only good sex or good drugs could.

Later, she said, “Tell me now if you’re like that.”

“Like what, baby?”

“Like Jibb. Crazy.”

“I’m crazy, all right. I don’t have a lick of sense, but I know I’m not God’s chosen. I’m a Devil’s Disciple, man. Does that mean God hates me and the Devil loves me? No, it just means that neither have any use for biker trash like me. But one thing you can be sure of: I don’t stand out in worm rains. I’m scared shitless of them and that’s the truth.”

“I think you’ll do then.”

“Any port in a storm?”

“Something like that,” she said, putting her head on his chest.

* * *

They took it easy for a few days after that. No hurry. Just pushing along slow down the pavement. In Sauk City, which was mostly empty except for some Army units patrolling the streets that paid them no mind, and the

locals who were armed behind their fenced-in yards, Dirty Mary decided she wanted some candles of all things. She had a real love of candles, and didn't like getting it on unless candles were burning. That's the way she was. So Slaughter pulled his hog over before a big gift shop and in they went.

He stood around paging through dusty magazines while Dirty Mary looted the candle section and that's when a form came shambling out of the back, a big man in a dirty khaki uniform and a badge. "I'm the law around here and I caught you," he said. "I caught you and you're mine. Winner, winner, chicken dinner."

The cop had been dead a couple weeks at least, but was still a big boy that was boiling hot with rot. His stiff white crew cut was patchy, as was the scalp below, like birds had been picking at it. His face was gray, mottled, and scabrous, skinless from his nose on down, loops of black slime foaming from his mouth, staining the front of his uniform shirt.

It was nothing Slaughter hadn't expected. What bothered him, though, was that the cop still had his service pistol on his hip.

"We can come to agreement," said the cop, his voice scratchy like something from a wind-up phonograph. "Suck my cock and we call it an even trade."

For one second Slaughter thought John Law was talking to him but that's when he realized that the cop did not even seem aware of his presence. He was addressing Dirty Mary. He had eyes for nothing or no one else. Maybe in life he'd once been sucked-off by some runaway or desperate woman and that was just replaying in the rotting spools of his brain.

"You suck it, woman," he said, a long white worm coming out of his ear and dropping to the floor. "How's about it? Winner, winner, chicken dinner."

Dirty Mary could have panicked and made it all worse, but she kept her head and did not once look over at Slaughter who the cop had not sighted by that point.

"Okay," she said.

The cop unzipped his pants and took out a cancerous-looking trouser snake that was bloated black-red like a blood sausage. It was singularly the most vile-looking thing that Slaughter had ever seen. And what made it worse was that it was moving from the larval action within.

Dirty Mary, cool as December ice, went down on her knees. She was so absolutely believable that for one crazy—and disturbing—moment, Slaughter actually thought she was really going to take that hose of rotten pork in her mouth, but it was just a play.

“Pull your pants down,” she said, wrinkling her nose against the stink that was so close to her now.

The cop did, and that was real sharp thinking on her part because his gunbelt went down with his pants. He stood there, his penis engorged, flies flitting about the bulbous head.

That’s when Slaughter stepped around the magazine rack with the .357 Combat Mag in his hand. The cop saw it. Saw him. And a dopey sort of look came over what remained of his face. His teeth gnashed, his penis shrank, and black foam came out of his mouth. It was honestly hard to say at that moment whether he was angry or embarrassed…again, he was probably just playing out some past memory. Maybe he’d gotten caught in the act with his pants down way back when, too.

Regardless, he was certainly caught this time.

“Winner, winner, chicken dinner?” he asked.

Slaughter shot him in the forehead and the slug pierced his brain, tumbled around in there and exited the side of his head, taking his ear with it. He stumbled around and then went over like a nine pin, his skull shattered and loose from the slug so that it blew apart when it struck the floor.

Dirty Mary collected her candles and they got out of there.

She was really something. Slaughter had a lot of respect for the balls the woman had. And other than breaking a bottle over his head and trying to stab him once or twice, she was good to him in those rare moments when they weren’t fighting. Like the old song said, she was dirty-sweet, oh yeah.

Chapter Four

The dead kid had an Army-issue rucksack so Slaughter went through it. It mostly contained food, a few well-thumbed fuck books, and a carton of cigarettes that were probably stale as hell. Taking his time, Slaughter helped himself to a can of Franco-American Spaghetti with Meatballs, a couple Hershey bars, then he smoked a couple of the kid's cigarettes, checked the load on the M-1 and almost laughed when he realized the kid only had one bullet. Barney Fife, here.

He was thinking about checking out. Just climbing back up the hill—with the kid's food, of course—and jumping on his scoot, eating some road. It wasn't like he was in love with Dirty Mary, and that crazy bitch would sell him down the road first chance she could if a better offer came along. That's the sort of mama she was. But if he did that it would mean he would miss out on the entertainment when the Ratbags tried to bust a piece off her and he figured that was going to be real good.

So he stayed.

Maybe he stayed for Dirty Mary; maybe for the Ratbags in case they needed medical attention. Mostly he stayed for himself. He'd been looking for action for a long time and he wasn't about to duck out on it now that he had it. Besides, he wasn't much on running unless things got real itchy so he was going to stay and break a few heads, relieve some of that tension building in his chest.

Taking the kid's ruck with him, he went around to the living room window so he could voyeur the fun in there. No internet or DVDs anymore, a man had to get his porn wherever he could. He almost laughed at that. That was good. That was funny.

He peered into the window.

Okay, now it was getting good.

Dirty Mary was playing games and those stupid fuckers didn't even realize that they'd been baited and pulled into the spider's web. By the time she started sucking the blood out of them it would be too late. But for the time being she was content on sucking something else. One of the Ratbags, maybe even that boy Snake, was standing there and Dirty Mary was on her knees in front of him, bobbing on him, showing him how good she was with her mouth. The other four were gathered around and a couple of them already had their flies unzipped in preparation for the fun to come. They were real gents because they'd even let Mary wipe the blood from her face. Real Christian gentlemen they were.

Mary was putting on a good show and the Ratbag she was blowing was off in la-la land, never knowing it could be that good. The others had forgotten their guns and that's exactly what Mary wanted. She wasn't stupid. Sex for her wasn't like it was for most women. With Dirty Mary it was like a handshake; you sealed every deal with it. She could do more tricks with a good length of dick than a rodeo cowboy with a horsehair lariat.

And she'd be sealing their deals, all right.

Slaughter lit a cigarette, wishing he had some popcorn.

You could go in there and help her, he thought, but instantly dismissed the idea. Mary didn't need help. She might even get pissed if he broke up the party. Let her have some fun. Already her free hand was sneaking around the back of her belt and going for that razor.

The Ratbags weren't even aware of it.

Except maybe the short, Hispanic looking guy in the back. Maybe Mary wasn't his kind of thing. Maybe he liked to drop his worm in a different sort of pond.

Here it comes, Slaughter thought.

Just about the time the guy Mary was working on was about to loosen his load, his eyes all glazed over, and his three compatriots were sweating with anticipation…Mary went in for the kill. She grabbed the guy's sack and squeezed it to pulp just as she sank her teeth in his business like a shark chomping down on some good red meat.

The guy screamed.

Sure, it was bloody murder.

He knocked Mary aside and fell back, his dick nearly bitten in half, his hands trying to stem the flow of blood. Mary came out with that razor and

sliced another guy that tried to take hold of her, laying his hands open and almost blinding still another.

But then they had her.

“Shit,” Slaughter said, crushing out his smoke. “She must be losing her touch.”

He went around front, kicked open the door, and stepped right in with the Combat Mag in his hand. It was a big, blue steel piece of death and they saw it. Saw how their own guns—three M16s and two hunting rifles—were not within easy reach.

“Who the fuck are you?” one of them said.

Dirty Mary had been beaten down now and the men had knives in their hands. What was coming for her next wouldn’t be pleasant. The dude she’d bitten was writhing on the floor, bleeding all over the damn place. He was not screaming now, but moaning and sobbing, and it was such a pathetic spectacle that Slaughter almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

“Name’s Slaughter,” he said. “Mary? Get up.”

“Fuck took you so long, you prick?”

“Got here soon as I could.”

Dirty Mary’s brown eyes were simmering like hot molasses. She wiped blood from her lips with the back of her hand. “Oh, really? I bet you were standing outside looking in through the window, you goddamn asshole. It would be so like you to think this was all a joke. Think it was funny that these limp-dicks were raping me.”

“Didn’t look much like rape to me.”

“You asshole.”

“How’d that shit taste?” he asked her and when she made to come at him with more castration in mind, he waved the gun at her. He put the Mag back on the Ratbags. “Wait a minute…were you fine citizens *raping* this woman?”

The biggest of them, the guy who’d been next on the train, managed a smile that was thin as a paper cut. “We weren’t raping anyone. She volunteered.”

“THE FUCK I DID!” Dirty Mary shouted at him. “DON’T YOU BELIEVE THAT SHIT, SLAUGHTER! THEY FORCED ME!”

Slaughter nodded. “Sure. Now grab their guns, Mary.”

She did.

“Now throw them out the door. Eject the magazines and throw the bullets into the bushes.”

She did that, too.

“Now we can be civilized and talk business.” Slaughter smiled at them. “First off, who said you could mistreat my old lady?”

“Fuck are you talking about?”

“Her, I’m talking about *her.* You ain’t got no right to be doing that. If you would have been civil, I would have sold her to you. Maybe a carton of cigarettes or a bottle of good booze. I’m not a scalper.”

“Hey, fuck you, Slaughter,” Dirty Mary said, still making no attempt to cover up her breasts. “I’m not for sale.”

“You’re always for sale, woman.”

She glared at him. “I’ll kill you. I swear, I’ll fucking kill you.”

Slaughter believed her. That was one of the reasons he made her throw the guns out the door. There were things in life that didn’t go together real well like open flame and dynamite…or Dirty Mary and guns. You had to keep them apart in order to keep the body count low.

The Ratbags just watched him. What kind of game was this? Was he fucking with them? He wasn’t really going to sell them the woman, now was he?

They didn’t know Slaughter was all. They didn’t know the kind of shit a man like him was capable of. That he had once sold his old lady to another biker for a dollar and then bought her back for a pack of cigarettes. That’s the kind of guy he was.

Slaughter turned his attention to the bleeding man on the floor. “Your friend…that Snake?”

“How’d you know?”

“The kid out back told me.” Slaughter looked down at the dickless wonder groaning and moaning. “Sorry, Snake, but I think you’re gonna need a new name.”

With their leader so unfortunately incapacitated, the Ratbags just didn’t know what they should do. The biker and the woman were some kind of couple apparently. The biker had a gun and he looked plenty mean.

“How much will you give me for her?” he asked them.

Dirty Mary sneered at him. “You cheap sonofabitch—”

“Shut up,” Slaughter told her.

He smiled at the Ratbags and they were too stunned by what he was saying to do anything but stare. That's because they didn't who they were dealing with. They didn't know how badly he was itching for a fight, how badly he needed some action, and how badly he wanted to lay down some hurt. Above all, they didn't know that Slaughter was a hardcore 1%er who rode fast and punched hard, always leaving a trail of broken hearts and bodies in his wake.

But they were about to find out.

He looked at the gun in his hand. "This bothering you boys?" He almost handed it to Dirty Mary, but he thought better of it and slid it back in the canvas holster. "Now we're even. Now we can talk business. We can discuss this like civilized men, citizens, or we can drop the gloves and let the blood flow. Your choice. Entirely your choice."

Now that the gun was out of sight and out of mind, the Ratbags were feeling better about themselves. Their old arrogance returned and they felt like men again—all except Snake. They had knives and they were going to use them. First on the biker. And then on his woman. Slaughter let them come in. Like Dirty Mary, he had baited them and now he was going to spring the trap. The Ratbags didn't know all the gang wars and prison fights he'd been in, how he liked to reel his enemies in like this before he beat 'em down.

He waited.

They waited.

He was waiting for the big guy to pull his knife because he would. It was only a matter of time. He was the biggest and he looked to be second-in-command so he would have to make a move or he would lose face with the others. Slaughter was looking forward to it. All he needed was to get that big piece of shit in close and then he'd break his arms, smash his nose to pulp, thumb out his eyes, and puncture his solar plexus, leave him rolling in the dirt.

"Well?" he said. "Like Dirty Mary said, either show your dicks or put them away."

Mary hissed at him.

And then it started.

* * *

The biggest one came first, as expected.

He wasn't an experienced knife fighter. Instead of slashing out with circular thrusts and timed straight jabs, he lunged forward, bringing his blade—a Marine K-bar—down in an overhead arc. Slaughter pivoted at the last second, snatched the guy's wrist and twisted it fast and fierce, breaking it, and when the guy pitched forward he kneed him in the face and dropped him.

Things happened fast then.

As he put down the big guy, one of them got up behind him and slipped an arm around his throat and another charged in with a hunting knife. Slaughter jumped up as the Ratbag clutched him and kicked the one with the knife in the stomach. The guy let out a whoosh of air and went down at Dirty Mary's feet and then she had the knife. He looked up at her, wide-eyed and dazed, the wind knocked out of him, and she started stabbing him, going at it in a real kinetic, kill-happy frenzy. She slashed him across the face and jabbed him in the throat, the arm, then sank the blade between his shoulder blades, riding it down and twisting it while the guy screamed out in pain.

Then the little Hispanic guy came up and kicked her in the head and she lost the knife, a couple of teeth, and started wailing out her death song.

Slaughter fell back into the clutches of the Ratbag who had him in a chokehold and brought his head back with everything he had into the guy's nose, which dislocated with a popping sound. Then he had his Gurkha knife out, the *Kukri*, and as the guy pressed his hands to his shattered nose, blood running between his fingers, Slaughter slashed him across the ribs and took his left arm off at the elbow.

There was one of them left by then, the little Hispanic dude, except he was the smart one and he ran outside. Just as Slaughter was going to go after him, finish him out there and make it slow, another truck came roaring down the drive, skidding to a halt before the farmhouse.

He sneaked a peek out the window and saw two guys in camos jump out of the cab. One of them was carrying a .30-30 Winchester and he brought it up quick and fired at Slaughter's silhouette behind the curtains. Slaughter jumped away just as the bullet punched through the glass. But even so, he felt the hot trail of that round pass just by his head.

More rounds came in, shattering windows in their frames and punching into the walls.

It was about this time that he saw that Dirty Mary was down.

“Shit,” he said.

He crawled over to her and she was gone. She’d taken a slug in the side of the head that nearly split her skull in half. It was his fault and he knew it. If he hadn’t been playing silly fucking games, if he’d just charged in with his Mag and drilled them all, she’d still be alive.

A few more rounds came chewing into the room.

He slid over by the front door and kicked it closed with his boot. More rounds punched through it. He sidled along the wall and threw the lock so it wouldn’t be easy for them.

He heard the staccato report of an M16 on full auto. It was like Bonnie and Clyde out there, he thought, as he crawled along the floor, snaking on his belly and seeking a defensive position. There were three of them now and they were circling the house, just blasting away at the windows, laying down a heavy volume of fire and hoping that they’d gotten him.

Snake and the big guy were still alive; broken and bleeding, but still alive.

Slaughter went after them with the Gurkha knife and killed them both, taking their heads clean off.

About then, the shooting ceased and he could hear the three of them talking out there. Chatting at first as the Hispanic guy told them how the biker had torn them new assholes. Then they all started getting pissed off and randy, wanting payback.

“HEY, ASSHOLE! COME OUT AND WE’LL MAKE IT QUICK!”

But Slaughter figured they probably wouldn’t do that at all.

He had the *Kukri*, the SS dagger, and the .357 Combat Mag. The latter had six rounds and Slaughter had one speed loader in the pocket of his vest. The .357 was devastating at short range, but it was no match against the M16 or the .30-30. They were rifles and they had range. If he was going to toast those fuckers, then he needed to first get them to expend as much ammo as possible and then make them come inside after him.

First things first.

Time to play the psychological card and throw the fear of Jesus…or the Devil…into them. Make them think they were dealing with a Grade-A meat-eater, a down home psychopath with absolutely no respect for human life…or human remains for that matter.

Slaughter crawled over to Snake’s corpse.

He'd put out a lot of blood and it was like a slow-drying red pool around him. Using the Gurkha knife he reached out and stabbed Snake's head with the tip, dragging it out of the pool. He sheathed the knife and took the head by its greasy, blood-slicked hair and crept over to one of the windows.

"COME ON OUT, FUCKHEAD! YOU GOT THIRTY SECONDS OR WE COME IN AFTER YOU AND DO THINGS THE HARD WAY!" one of the voices called out to him.

That's exactly what you're going to have to do, citizen, Slaughter thought as it all played out in his mind like the reels of some old movie—how it was going to work and how he was going to kill them and, after it was done, how he was going to ride on out and swing it west to the Deadlands. That's where his destiny was. And these pukes were getting in the way of that. Besides, he *had* to kill them now because they'd wasted Dirty Mary and even though what he felt for her was many miles away from true love, he figured he owed her a little revenge because nobody appreciated revenge like that alley cat.

"YOU HEAR ME? YOU GOT THIRTY SECONDS!"

Poor bastards. They weren't used to this shit. They weren't used to being pushed around like this, fucked with and tormented by one man. They were cheap thugs and armed hoodlums who traveled in the pack of the Red Hand because it gave them strength and kept them from pissing themselves. They liked their victims to be weak and submissive. They didn't like them to fight back.

"TWENTY SECONDS!" came the booming voice of faux authority.

"FUCK YOU!" Slaughter called out and whipped Snake's head through the broken window.

He heard it thump to the ground out there and roll like a dropped ball. The Ratbags cried out, swearing and sickened. They began firing at random. Burning up a good thirty rounds, venting their rage at him.

"Have your fun, citizens," Slaughter said under his breath, sitting down with his back up against the wall. He lit a cigarette and stretched. Well, he'd been looking for action and he was getting his fix today. He was overdosing on the shit and the situation should have scared him, but it didn't. He wasn't completely comfortable with it, but it made him feel alive. His heart was beating again. His blood was flowing hot. This was what it was about. Death and violence made the man, filled the emptiness inside him and fleshed him out.

He listened to them chattering away out there like old ladies at a Sunday sewing circle. They had a decision to make. One of the newbies was cautioning them about wasting rounds because they were getting low. They'd already used up most of what they had and most of what the guns that Dirty Mary had thrown out into the yard contained. They had to play it cool. The other newbie, a first class hothead, wanted to charge in and take the biker, but the Hispanic guy told him that that would be as stupid as kissing the barrel of a .44. They argued amongst themselves for a bit until the newbie had an idea. He'd run and get reinforcements while the other two waited. Which, Slaughter knew, meant there was a nest of the Red Hand nearby. Not good. Hothead said they'd look like pussies begging help and the Hispanic guy—who seemed to have a way with words—said 'better a live pussy than a dead dick'.

Slaughter was enjoying the exchange.

The longer it went on, the better it would be for him. Either way, he was going to get them. The only way they were going to survive this was by hauling tail and there was no way hothead would do that.

"Watch it!" the Hispanic guy cried out. "He's got a gun!"

"So do I," said Hothead, moving in close to the house.

Slaughter could see his silhouette bobbing and weaving out there. Hothead kept calling out to him, telling Slaughter how he was going to fuck him up, but Slaughter did not respond. Let them think he was wounded or dead or dying. Whatever it took to draw them in and play the next card.

Slaughter moved.

He butted his cigarette and took the decapitated head of the big knife fighter and crept along the wall with it until he was inches from the window that Hothead was approaching.

The barrel of his M16 was moving along the edge of the window frame.

"You dead in there?" Hothead taunted.

Slaughter felt like smarting off, saying, *yeah, I'm dead, you fucking hillbilly,* but then he remembered where he was and how things were these days. The old rules didn't apply. Just because you were dead didn't mean you couldn't talk.

The barrel came in an inch, sweeping back and forth.

Christ, this guy was stupid.

The barrel came in two inches, then three.

Slaughter waited. He rose up, back flat against the wall, the head in his right hand. He started swinging it back and forth by the hair, getting a feel for the heft of it the way an athlete likes to get the feel for the ball he has to throw.

As the barrel pulled back, Slaughter moved.

He swung the head out with everything he had, bringing it around in a fast arc and tossing it right at the guy out there. The other Ratbags saw him move but with their brother in the line of fire, they couldn't open up. The head hit old Hothead, smacking into his shoulder, knocking him to his ass, and he responded in kind by firing off ten rounds into the sky.

That did it.

That crazy fucker in there was throwing heads and that just wasn't right.

The Ratbags out there lost it. Even the Hispanic guy who was something of a cool head. He ran around the side of the house, no doubt making for the back door, while Hothead jogged up the porch steps and prepared to bust in the front way. The other guy—the one with the .30-30—was giving them covering fire, just randomly putting rounds through windows hoping to keep Slaughter down covering his head.

Not so.

He slipped out of the living room and into the dining room. There was a door leading from it out into the kitchen. The Hispanic guy would have to go through it to get to him. Slaughter hedged his bets by sliding a chair in front of the door so it would not be easy for him. He'd have to fight his way through.

Hothead was jiggling the front door handle.

The other guy was still peppering the house indiscriminately.

Slaughter crawled into the living room. They were going to sandwich him, try the classic pincer movement, which meant he had to get creative. He dragged the corpse of the one-armed Ratbag into the dining room, then hoisted him up to a standing position. Sonofabitch stank pretty good. Not just the blood and meat but the shit in his pants as well.

Slaughter held him up.

Hothead blew the lock off the front door and stormed in. Slaughter could hear his boots clomping about as he moved around in the living room, scanning for unfriendlies. Then he saw the blood smear drag mark leading into the dining room. He followed it, thinking the biker was bleeding to death.

Slaughter was waiting for him just around the side of the door.

He'd have precious few seconds when Hothead slipped into the room. He waited. And in came Hothead with his rifle raised to fire. As he turned, Slaughter heaved the corpse at him. The fear and confusion were instantaneous. A corpse plowing into anyone would raise fear and disgust and more than a little horror, but these days with the walking dead breeding like flies in a dead cat's skull, a corpse coming at you was the last thing you wanted to see. The corpse slammed into Hothead and they both went down in a heap. Hothead dropped his rifle, squirming and fighting to get the corpse off him. And by the time he did, Slaughter brought the *Kukri* down on his skull, nearly cleaving his head in half.

He died flopping in a pool of blood and brain matter.

And by then, the Hispanic guy was fighting his way through the door, firing a few rounds as he did so.

Slaughter was on him.

He brought the blade of the Gurkha knife down on his hand that gripped the barrel of the sixteen, freeing three fingers in the process. The Hispanic guy screamed and dropped the rifle and Slaughter slashed his eyes to running pink pulp and then sliced open his belly with another quick slash. The dying man hit the floor, kicking and shrieking, his bowels bulging from his belly.

A few more rounds were fired from outside.

Really enjoying the carnage by that point, Slaughter dragged Hothead's corpse into the living room and threw it out the window.

There was no more shooting.

The guy with the .30-30 jumped in one of the trucks and drove like hell, spitting gravel and making his escape. Too bad. He was the one that had popped Dirty Mary. Slaughter wanted him.

Stepping out into the sunshine, he grabbed the dead kid's ruck and made his way back to his hog. The shadows were growing long and he decided to grab a crib for the night down the road.

Then tomorrow…tomorrow he was heading west into the Valley of the Dead because that voice was getting real strong now.

Chapter Five

He found a rusty mobile home sheltered in the trees about six miles away and, after making sure it was secure against whatever might come, he rolled out his sleeping bag and fell asleep listening to mice chewing on the upholstery. It was a quiet night other than the mice and a lone coyote howling out in the woods. He had bad dreams and he was glad when he opened his eyes and it was light out.

He lay there, smoking, watching dust motes twist in the beams of sunlight and smelling the dank stink of the trailer.

Most days started out the same for Slaughter…dismal and desperate.

He'd wake up with a hint of hope that would turn to sheer anxiety by noon, complete despair by suppertime, and out and out misery by sundown. That's the way it had been for months now. He'd grit his teeth and close his eyes like somebody on a roller coaster and just wait for it to be over, his head filled with the glory of the old days and wild ways. Most of the time he couldn't feel a thing. Not happiness or sadness or anything in between. He'd just be numb as frostbite, stiff and wooden, going through the motions, like a corpse that had gotten tired of waiting for the funeral and decided to take a walk. One of these days, he supposed, he'd lay back down again for good.

These past weeks it had been getting progressively worse. Cooped up on the farm with Dirty Mary. Not moving. Not riding. Not doing anything but feeling that almost magnetic pull of the west and the Deadlands. Something out there was calling his name and it wanted him real bad.

It had gotten so that every day was a battle not to give in to it.

But he knew he couldn't leave until Dirty Mary hooked up with somebody else. There was no way in hell he was taking her out there. Now…that had changed.

No strings.

No responsibilities.

When Slaughter met Dirty Mary he knew she was trouble just like she knew *he* was trouble. But neither of them had cared because at the time there'd been a mutual need. They were both lonely and scarred-up following the Outbreak. They'd lost everything like most survivors had, and their lives had turned turtle. Slaughter knew she was one mean mama, but hell…you give a starving man a bone with a little meat on it and he enjoys every bite and every nibble. He feels like a rich man for awhile. And that's how he felt. Like something inside him was actually alive. Like there was hope for a happy ending after all. His intuition, of course, told him to run as fast and far away from her as he could, but he didn't listen. What his soul knew and what his heart said were two different things.

Now she was dead and that was a real shitter.

Slaughter would have buried her proper, but he figured the Red Hand would be coming back in force to sort his ass out and, truth be told, things like funerals and send-offs just didn't seem to matter much anymore. The dead were the dead and they had it better than the living (the ones that didn't move, that was) so you left them to it.

He had some Spam and canned beef stew for breakfast and then went out to his scoot and packed his saddlebags properly for a long run.

It was time to head into the Deadlands.

* * *

About ten miles down the road, he found a little town called Freemont and siphoned gas from a pickup to fill his tank. He filled another five gallon can and strapped it to the back of his hog figuring it might be awhile in between fill-ups. Then he toured the town almost casually, looking for signs of wormboys or militias and seeing not a thing except for something weird in the river that cut through the town: some black, shiny, snake-like thing that darted out of the ebon water and took hold of a gull and pulled it under.

He didn't wait to see what it was because there were nameless things the farther you pushed west.

The rest of the town was just a graveyard. Empty houses, cars rusting at curbs, trees down in the middle of the streets, some bones scattered in yards but not much else. He didn't see so much as a scavenging dog or a single

rat. Either Freemont had been devastated by the Outbreak or its citizens pulled up stakes and retreated to the east. Probably both.

As he approached the outer boundaries of the town he came upon block after block of burnt, razed houses. The streets were torn apart by bomb craters. There were literally dozens of skeletons in the rubble or wound up in yellow grasses in vacant lots.

Apparently there had been some kind of battle fought there.

Back out on the highway, he headed west, rolling out on 94, throttling up, listening to the constant calming bellow of the hog's straight pipes. Traffic was light, nonexistent in fact, not like the old days when you hit the road. Now the only cages out there were wrecked cars and buses, semis in the ditch.

But the road…it owned him.

There was a special feeling when you were on your scoot, aiming her down the ribbon of pavement, you and the bike joined at the hip, the wind in your face, the road coming up to meet you. It was freedom and it was exhilaration, it was electricity in your veins, every sense heightened and purified. Things made sense.

Slaughter rode for miles like that, feeling clean and unpolluted: real.

Soon enough, the memories came back, filling his brain with shadows and ghosts, road runs and field events and rallies, riding out front of the pack. All gone now, all gone. *Think about something else*, he told himself. *Think about where you're going and what you're going to do when you get there.*

Sure, I'd do that but I just don't know. I'm going on a hunch, a gut instinct, listening to voices telling me what to do and where to go same as I have my whole life and that's all I know about it.

Well, you must have some sort of plan. You've always had some sort of plan, Slaughter. Something hazy in the back of your mind…or what there is of it.

True. Only this time I'm flying by the seat of my pants more than ever before. I have to do this. I have to go out here. There's something waiting for me and I don't know what but I got this crazy ass feeling that it might be the most important thing of my life.

You could always turn tail, head back to Milwaukee or Chi, hide out there. You got lots of friends and you know it.

Sure and I got lots of enemies, too. My friends are all with other clubs and how long before they want me to flip patches and join up? And I ain't doing that. I might be the last free living Devil's Disciple, but I'll be 100% Disciple Nation until the day I die. Besides, if I go back I'll have to live like the wanted man I am. Only a matter of time before somebody dimes me and I end up back in prison.

Then maybe you shouldn't have killed those two cops. Maybe for the first time in your life you should have asked a few questions before you started shooting.

Questions, shit. Those cops gunned down Neb in cold blood. Maybe they had him in their sights for trafficking, but they were supposed to be the law. Neb wasn't even packing. He didn't even have a blade on him. They asked him his name and when he told them, they blew his ass away. What was I supposed to do? He was a brother, he was a Disciple. It was my oath to avenge him. It was murder. It was nothing but fucking murder.

And it was.

They'd been hanging low in New Castle, Neb and Slaughter, the last two Disciples, keeping under the radar because there were still a few minor warrants floating on them—probation violation in Neb's case, assault in Slaughter's. Chickenshit stuff from before the Outbreak that the John Laws decided still needed to be enforced. And this, Jesus, with half the country in ruins and zombies walking the streets and mad dog militias clashing with the Army and nukes dropping out west. When the cops kicked their way into Neb's old lady's apartment, Slaughter had been in the can but he heard what came down, how Neb had run some cover for him so he could get away and then the cops put him down.

And as a brother, as a Disciple, there was only one thing Slaughter could do. While the cops were celebrating their kill, he came out of the bathroom with a MAC-10 that Neb had stashed behind the toilet. The cops saw him. Their shit-eating grins evaporated. They reached for their weapons and Slaughter gave it to them full auto, emptying the clip into them, blowing them apart like party piñatas, their stuffing scattered about in red, runny pools.

Didn't take long for word to get around that Neb's old lady—Indiana, she was called—had dimed them, brought the heat down on their asses. Didn't take long either for Slaughter to hunt her down and do her up proper

with a knife. And it took even less time for the State of Pennsylvania to put out a warrant for John Slaughter…three counts of capital murder.

Of course, he tipped that one in the law's favor by leaving the spent MAC-10 with his prints all over it next to the perforated bodies of the cops. Same went for the knife they found sticking out of Indiana's belly. But it hadn't been carelessness on his part. Slaughter had been in and out of county lock-ups, had pulled time in state and federal joints for everything from aggravated assault to armed robbery to battery of a police officer.

He knew the system.

He knew they'd match his prints.

And he *wanted* them to. Because that was part of the 1% lifestyle, that was part of the blood oath and the brotherhood—you're good to us, we're better to you; you fuck with us, we bring hell down upon your ass. The cops had murdered Neb in cold blood just because they wanted to and because they thought they were above the law. So Slaughter had returned the favor and took out them *and* their rat. It was a way for the world of police and criminals to know one thing: you hurt a Disciple, you get it in kind and no badge or court system or witness protection program will save your ass.

It was a statement. Because in the outlaw biker world, respect and fear were the primary tools of enforcement.

So Slaughter ran west.

And he was still running.

Running into a deep dark pocket of desolation where they wouldn't find him.

And if they did, well, out in the Deadlands it would be war to the knife.

Chapter Six

Around noon when those sweetgrass Minnesota hills were so close he could smell them and feel their freedom chugging in his veins along with his blood, he came across a compound that was secured with a chainlink fence and had guard towers set at its perimeter.

Right away, it intrigued him.

Funny a place like this, out here.

The idea of that reached out, gripped him, held him, made him downshift and circle back around. He figured he was in no hurry, though once he was across the big river and into the Deadlands he was going to breathe easier.

Slaughter pulled to a stop on the hill, dug in his saddlebags and brought out a pair of compact Minox binoculars. They came in handy when you needed to see what was down the road a piece. He scanned the compound. No sign of life. Lots of weathered gray blockhouses lined up like ranks of tombstones. Nobody in the guard towers. No movement anywhere. It looked deserted.

He decided he needed to have a look see.

He pulled up to the gates cautiously. They were locked with chains and rusty padlocks. The gate was the only spot along the high fence that didn’t have barbwire spooled atop it. It was here or nowhere. Strapping on his web belt with the Combat Mag in its olive-drab holster and the *Kukri* in its leather sheath, he climbed up and over, dropping into the dirt drive on the other side. He followed it up to the first row of buildings, his motorcycle boots kicking up clouds of dust. Most of the windows were either boarded over by unfinished planks or broken out completely. He tried one door, then another, both were locked. Both shook in their frames and he figured he could have kicked his way through had the need struck him.

But it didn’t.

The road zigzagged amongst the rows of block houses, a few sheet metal pole buildings that were bleeding rust. It was a warm day and the air was thick and turgid like summer molasses, a negligible breeze blowing out hot and dry. He was struck by the silence. In that place it was not something to be ignored: it was harsh and immense with an almost physical weight that bore down on you. He felt it around him like a dark river bursting its banks, flooding the compound with a stillness that was like a tide of darkness cutting through that glaring, bone-white day. It broke up into channels and creeks and eddies, each flowing soundless and distant. Loose rain gutters creaked. Flies lit in the air. Little whirling dust-devils sought cul-de-sacs and pockets of sinister shadow between the buildings.

If there was one thing Slaughter had learned to trust in all his years of living free and riding hard, it was his instinct. It had saved his bacon more times than he could remember. And right then it was warning him away from this place, sensing despair and misery and agony beyond comprehension. An aura of seamless, black evil that crouched in every shadow, pressed up to every grimy window pane, and dripped like blood in the darkness behind bolted doors. If the compound had a voice, it was a scream in the dead of night and a whimpering of whipped dogs in the bright of day.

He moved on, his shadow following him, probing deeper into the mystery of the compound. He was wondering what he wanted with this place but knowing it was not a matter of wanting but of *knowing*. Knowing what this drab, utilitarian place was or had been. It looked like a prison farm or a ramshackle military installation. Whatever it was, it was a place that needed a chainlink fence topped with razor wire and guard towers. So it was either to keep something out or something else in.

Just ahead there was a long, low building. Its windows were covered in heavy steel mesh like those of a madhouse. All roads seemed to converge here so Slaughter knew this was where he had to go. The door was locked when he climbed the steps, but weathering had splintered and weakened it.

He kicked it open and a dry, awful animal stink wafted out at him.

Wrinkling his nose, he drew the Mag from its holster, his palm sweaty on the rubberized grip. The stink of age and death were apparent, but there was something more, a ghost of something haunting this place and he could not honestly put a name to it. Inside, he found what appeared to be offices with harsh metal desks and uncomfortable plastic furniture. File cabinets. There

were papers scattered everywhere and a calendar on the wall five years out of date which would have put it at about the time of the Outbreak.

Interesting.

Next, he found himself in a high-ceilinged room that was nearly perfectly circular. It was filled with wreckage, but apparently it had been some sort of med lab judging from shattered lab glassware, culturing vats, microscopes, and drug cabinets. All of which looked like somebody had taken a sledgehammer after them and then danced a merry jig on the fragments. Like everything else, there was easily an inch of dust covering them which gave them the look of artifacts mired in silt from a sunken ship. There was a stainless steel table, a dissection table maybe, and the remains of a corpse upon it…though maybe *corpse* wasn't quite right because this thing was a mummy, little more than a skeleton sheathed in a leathery sort of flesh that had cracked open from the dryness, spilling a powdery film. Its skullish face and exposed rib slats were threaded with cobwebs.

Slaughter had some ideas about the lab, but nothing concrete.

Not yet.

He kicked around at the debris on the floor, raising twisting clouds of dust that made him cough. Just junk. Glass, papers, rubber tubing, what might have been dirty surgical instruments and spent needles.

The most interesting thing in there was what was set into the walls: cages. They were empty, steel mesh doors thrown open. Whatever had been in them was long gone, yet a dankness still held inside them. That weird ghosting animal stink.

Slaughter went into the next room.

Another office. There was a zippered case of DVDs on the desk, a few stacked file folders, books on pathology and microbiology, loose papers. He opened the folders. Mostly scientific notations, and nothing he could understand. Beneath them was a logbook of some sort. The entries written in a precise hand read:

Stillwater 7 subjects Sept. 6
Black River Falls 23 subjects Sept. 14
Maiden Rock 3 subjects Sept. 29
Plum City 5 subjects Oct. 4
Prescott 12 subjects Oct. 13

It ran on and on like that, page after page. There was no doubt in his mind what it all meant: this was some sort of experimental station where victims of the Outbreak were brought for medical and biological study. After the worms started raining from the sky and the countryside was overrun with the living dead, the healthy ones ran east so nobody would have known about this place or objected to what they were doing here. The compound was a concentration camp of sorts.

Slaughter was going to leave the room when he noticed the circuit breaker door. It was partially open. There were dozens of breaker switches for the different rooms and buildings, outside security lights, etc. At the top were two red switches. One said *generator* and the other said *battery.*

For the hell of it he flicked *generator* but there was nothing.

When he flicked *battery* the lights came on.

“Still got a charge,” he said under his breath.

Which gave him an idea. There was a TV and DVD unit on a stand in the corner. Using a rag he found in the desk, he wiped the dust from them. He turned on the DVD player and got a green light. The TV came on with a field of static. He chose a DVD at random from the case and put it in the player. After more static, he watched images of worms that were being cultivated, dissected, held out for inspection wriggling in forceps, then a series of microscopic images which must have been tissue samples and sectioned worms. There was no sound, which made it all kind of eerie. The video kept pixilating randomly and it went back to static…then, for just an instant, like some kind of flashing subliminal sort of thing, he saw a face… then he saw it again.

Then nothing but static.

He stood there, feeling a worming unease in his belly. It was surely nothing, yet that unease was growing and he could not adequately understand why the face disturbed him so much. Only that it did. His belly flipped over. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead.

He knew he hadn’t imagined it. When he closed his eyes, the image was still burned onto his retinas: a man in a black hat whose face was an almost violent shade of lunar white, a cratered/pockmarked face with brilliant pink eyes staring out.

Swallowing, Slaughter backed the DVD up to the worms and played it through the static. No face. Nothing. He tried it again and then three more times after that.

No face.

Maybe it was an optical illusion, man.

But he did not believe that.

He tried another DVD. Blank. Then another. About halfway through, things stared to heat up and get interesting.

Of course, that was purely subjective.

Because what Slaughter saw was sickening.

The video showed an Asian girl of maybe ten or eleven who was without a doubt one of the newly risen judging from her stark gray-white complexion and vacant, shining eyes like pools of gasoline. She appeared to be tied to a chair. There were several gaping holes in her face that were acrawl with maggots. She was opening and closing her mouth as if she was speaking and Slaughter was glad there was no audio. Her face and throat were bulging from some sort of motion beneath and if he wondered what that might be, he didn't have to wonder long because what was nesting inside her started coming out in a writhing, almost liquid profusion: worms. Not maggots. Maggots would have been pretty pedestrian. No, these were the fleshy red worms that fell from the sky and reanimated the dead. They came out of her nostrils like snotty ribbons of red licorice and slithered from her ears like scarlet snakes. They were huge and bloated unlike any he had seen before.

The girl offered the camera a cadaverous smile and more of the worms came pouring out of her mouth in a slimy, stringy bile and by then she was shuddering and contorting, her flesh cracking open and spilling an oozing tide of the things that swarmed over her, coiling and undulant, until she became just a hothouse gush of putrescent infestation that existed only to birth the worms in ever-increasing numbers.

It was hideous.

As he made to shut it off, that face, that ghoulish white face with the pink eyes, flashed across the screen three more times. He knew he had seen it. He backed the video up but it was not there. It was just not there. His unease grew. He began to get the most unsettling feeling that something was going on, something of a personal nature. Something intended for him and him alone.

Slaughter killed the video.

That was enough.

If that face was intended for you then what the hell does it mean? What can *it mean?*

He watched two more videos but saw nothing. Nothing at all. He stood there, balanced between belief and skepticism, between sanity and a yawning black pit of madness.

He refused to think about it anymore. The girl. He thought about that girl on the video.

He didn't know exactly what that was about either but he didn't like it. In his experience, which was considerable, the worms came out of the sky in worm rains. *Check.* They crawled into the dead and reanimated them. *Check.* If you got caught in the rains, they would get inside you as small crawling larval things and you would die within twelve hours and then, sooner or later, you'd rise back up. *Check.* Generally, when you killed a worm zombie (as they were often known) a *single* worm would crawl out, looking for a new corpse to invade. *Check.* These were the things he knew to be true, but never, ever had he seen something like the girl in the video who apparently was like some kind of worm nursery.

And did that mean the worms had jumped up a step in evolution and found a better way to multiply or, and worse, had the scientists at the compound in their research created that situation on purpose?

Slaughter did not know.

Right then, he did not know about a lot of things.

He went over to the wall to the breaker box and killed the juice. Time to get back out on the road. It was at that moment that he heard sounds from the other room…stealthy footsteps that were not so stealthy with the sound of glass crushed beneath them.

Shit.

He drew the Combat Mag and, trying to be quiet, stepped over to the doorway. As he got there he heard a voice in the other room, scratching and discordant like a fork drawn over a blackboard: *"I can smell the meat…I want to taste the meat,"* it said, pausing and making a slurping noise that sounded, if anything, like a kid sucking up noodles from a bowl of soup. *"Where is that meat…I can smell it…but where is it? Why won't it come closer?"*

He walked out into the lab and there was a zombie standing amongst the wreckage, a woman…or something with the general form a woman, a pulping, bioplasmic, gangrenous, fleshrot mass of female anatomy that was

glistening and dripping, alive with the swollen vermicular motion of dozens of glossy green hoses that snaked out from between her legs and pulsed from her belly like slit bowels. They erupted from her tits, filled her mouth and eye sockets and grew out of her head in creeping, pulsating ropes like the snakes of Medusa. They were parasitic and jelly-slimed, a peristaltic crawling mass with tiny barbed mouths that pissed a cabbage-green milk as they infested the hobbling necrotic husk of liquescent decay.

Slaughter had seen some shit in his time that made his blood run like Freon and filled his belly with dry ice, but this was beyond all that.

He took one fumbling step back and then another, his head rioting with the flyblown sewer stench of the thing.

"I smell the meat," she said, moving ever forward, knowing he was there and smelling him, but having no eyes with which to locate him, and Slaughter didn't think those suckering green tubes counted.

The noodle-sucking sound he heard in the office was the sound of those hoses sliding in and out of her mouth with a moist and rubbery noise like greased eels.

The idea of being embraced by the walking dead was bad enough in of itself, but the idea of this thing taking hold of him and burying him in the carious depths of its own pupal, ichorous flagellation was too much even for the strongest stomach.

As she came forward, he brought up the Combat Mag.

He didn't hesitate because he *couldn't* hesitate.

She heard him, began shambling in his direction, hissing with the motion of those green hoses and he opened up on her. The first round put a hole through her as big around as a fist, spraying black blood and wormy mucilage against the faces of the cages. She screamed with a shrill whining sound that was utter defeat and he put the next bullet right in her face, blowing her head apart into a thousand flying bits of bone, blood, brain matter, and oily green tissue. She took two more ungainly steps and did not fall down so much as she *collapsed* into a fleshy graveyard emulsion of yeasty and putrid raw matter boiling with red worms and wriggling green hoses tangled in the yellow-gray lattice of her bones.

Slaughter wasted no more time: he ran past her remains and out of that building into the dry heat outside, going down to his knees and gagging out a foamy vomit from his mouth. He breathed in and out, his hand so sweaty the .357 dropped into the dirt.

Finally, when his head stopped reeling, he picked up the gun and stood uneasily in the afternoon sunlight. He lit a cigarette and smoked it carefully, almost lovingly, letting the charge of nicotine chase the ghosts from his head.

As he smoked, he knew the smart thing to do, the reasonable thing, was to get on his scoot and eat some road.

But no one ever said he was smart.

Determined, maybe, and fatalistic, probably, but never smart.

He knew there was more here and he felt that right into his shivering marrow and before he left this fucking cemetery, he planned on finding out what.

* * *

That he wasn't alone in the compound became more apparent with each step he took. He had no doubt there were more zombies here…or, mutations of the same…but that wasn't all. He was certain he was being watched by someone that hailed from this side of the grave and he wished they'd show themselves already or take a shot at him. After what he'd seen in the lab, a little running gunplay would be just the thing to purge the darkness that filled him like a cup.

He kept going, out past another row of blockhouses until he came to a wide open field that was cut by a ditch that had to have been 200 feet long and at least half that in width.

It was filled with bones.

One skeleton could either unnerve you or make you feel somewhat sympathetic for the plight of its owner, but a mass grave like this that was nearly filled with them…well, it inspired awe and fear and despair. It looked like one of those bone pits from Majdanek or Birkenau that you saw on the old newsreels. There had to have been at the very least the remains of hundreds and hundreds of people in there. Adults, children, like some kind of wicker sculpture made of bones and skulls. None of them had died recently, for this was old death, bones gray or gleaming white with ancient dark stains upon them, riddled from the teeth of rats and the beak work of carrion crows and buzzards.

If any of it had been remotely recent or there had been but a single shred of meat to be had there would be flies below and ravens circling overhead.

Slaughter stared down in it, kicking a jawless skull into the pit that had been wedged precariously on the edge. It leered at him. It mocked him. He could almost hear its hollow laughter in the back of his head. *All you are, boy, I was once, and what I am, you shall soon be. Hee, hee, hee. Ain't that just a kicker?* He turned away from the pit, and as he did so he saw a shape dart from behind one of the blockhouses.

He sighed, not much in the mood for hide-and-seek. Whenever he played that game he usually came away with death on his hands and, after staring in that pit, he just wasn't up for it.

He heard scuttling, dragging footsteps.

Well, if it was a zombie they would have come right after him. A few of them returned from the grave with a certain amount of cunning but that was usually after dark. During the daytime they were all little better than deadheads, things that fed on the dead (or living) and were not ashamed of the fact.

No, not a zombie.

A person.

Maybe afraid, maybe just crazy, which brought up a whole new slate of troubles because the insane ones were as bad as the wormboys and sometimes worse because you really never knew what to expect.

Slaughter kept his eyes open, ready for what was coming.

He felt vaguely uncomfortable turning his back on the bone pit. A dark thread of superstitious terror was pulled tight in his head, but he knew there was nothing to worry about.

He started walking back to his bike, figuring he'd seen enough to give him a pretty good hypothesis about the sort of place this was or had been. Originally, it was probably some sort of military installation. Then, following the Outbreak, it became a research station where they were trying to figure out the worms, how to stop them maybe. Then, apparently, that ended and it became a Flesh Farm, one of those awful places you heard about like a Nazi extermination camp where gangs of wormboys herded the living to be fed upon at their leisure.

Now it was just a memory.

As he walked back past the lab building, eyes watching every shadow and every darkened doorway, hand on the butt of the Combat Mag, he could hear his stalker out there following his progress, keeping behind the buildings and out of sight.

“You can show yourself anytime, citizen,” Slaughter called out. “I ain’t gonna bite you.”

His voice echoed out in the desertion and that other moved about, failing horribly at its attempts to practice stealth. Finally, Slaughter heard footsteps behind him and whirled around to see an old man leaning up against the porch of a blockhouse. He looked like some grizzled desert rat from an old movie. All he lacked was a mule and a prospector’s pick. He looked fairly harmless with his soft gray eyes, slouch hat, and matted white beard, but Slaughter did not care for the shotgun he carried.

“You plan on using that?”

“No, son. It’s empty. I’m no threat to you.”

“Name’s Slaughter.”

“Rice. Martin Rice.”

“What’re you doing here?”

The old man set his shotgun on the porch and then eased his ass up next to it and it wasn’t easy. He looked frail; his limbs stiff, his back paining him some.

“What am I doing here?” Rice repeated, as if that was a pretty funny question. “Well, son, let me tell you. You probably already figured the sort of horror house this place was at one time so I won’t go into that, but now and again I come here to see if I can peg a few stragglers that come up from below.”

“Below?”

Rice took some time and explained it. Slaughter was right in thinking the compound had first been a military installation. It was built during World War II to house German POWs, then afterwards became the Kennebrau Proving Grounds during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts when artillery units used it to test their guns in the field out back. In the 1970’s it became a weekend training camp for the National Guard and then, following the Outbreak, a biological research facility that was part of the U.S. Army Medical Command.

“They were studying the worms. Trying to figure out some way of containing them, eradicating them, and coming up with a vaccine that would make people immune to the infection of the larva.” Rice shrugged. “But they never did. That’s when we were sent in. You see, the scientists became infected and pretty soon this was zombie central. They started capturing people and bringing them here.”

“Flesh Farm,” Slaughter said.

“You got it.”

“You said ‘we’ were sent in...”

The old man laughed. “I might not look it now but I was, some five years ago, a full colonel in the Army. I commanded the 1st Brigade of the 25th Infantry. Our job was to clean this place out. Long before we got here, about ten miles east in fact, we ran into serious resistance…”

The “resistance” had come in the form of wormboys that had massed in the thousands in a town called Freemont. The 1/25 rolled into town to bivouac for the night and what followed was a hell-for-leather nightmare in which Rice ordered his men to make a stand. The vicious skirmishing went on through the night with zombies attacking in waves. There was nowhere to retreat to as the dead surged from every direction. Even now, he said, he could still see it: the billowing smoke, soldiers falling and dying and crying out for help, the clatter of machine guns, and the boom of heavy field pieces. By morning, the 1/25 was a ragtag remnant of its former self. Even with the tactical and military superiority they possessed, the sheer numbers of the dead overwhelmed them. By dawn’s first light, Rice himself was a trembling thing splattered with dried blood and brains. With his ears still ringing with the thunder of small weapons fire and artillery, the wormboys charged in again, their numbers hardly depleted even though the streets were hip-deep with their remains. They started killing anything that was alive, feeding on the entrails and brains.

“Well, most of my men were dead and those that were still in one piece rose up, of course, against us. I think those of my men that were still alive deserted and I can’t say that I blame them.” Rice stared off into the distance. “I fought with a small contingent but the dead kept at us until it was just me.”

“And you’ve been here ever since, citizen?”

“Sure. I’m fighting a guerrilla war, son. I have a farmhouse a few miles from here that I use as a base. I don’t plan on stopping. I’ll kill those fucking ghouls till my last breath. Hell, last month I put down sixty-eight of ‘em. Wanna join my resistance?”

“Probably not.”

“You mind sharing one of those cigarettes with me?”

Slaughter gave him one and Rice told him that he was about all used up. These years of fighting the wormboys had left him old and broken beyond

his sixty-three years. And now here he was at the compound with an empty shotgun and bad legs. No way in hell he'd make it back to the farmhouse.

"I gotta bike out front," Slaughter told him. "I'll give you a lift if you don't mind riding bitch."

"Hell, I'm not choosy, son."

They made their way to the gate and it took some doing with Rice's poor physical condition. They had to stop a lot so he could rest. While they did so Slaughter sketched out for him where he was going and what he planned on doing there, which was pretty much what Rice had been doing here: exterminating the undead.

"Today I saw something, though," he admitted. "Something that made me think twice about my plans, citizen."

He described the woman in the lab and Rice said, "She came up from below. That's where the worst ones are. There's a containment level below and the worst sort of mutations are going on down there. What we need is a good airstrike with some bunker busters to slam the lid on this place but I don't imagine we'll get one."

"Probably not, citizen."

"Why the hell you keep calling me 'citizen'?" Rice wanted to know.

Slaughter laughed, but explained it all. He pointed to the red patch on his vest that read 1%er. Once upon a time, according to the American Motorcycle Association, it was said that 99% of motorcycle clubs were law-abiding citizens which meant that the other 1% were outlaws and members of what the law referred to as OMGs, Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs.

"Ah, so you're one of those rough-riders and hellraisers."

"I am a blood member of the Devil's Disciples. I was chapter president in Pittsburgh. I'm the last one. But I live as a Disciple and I die as a Disciple. Us 1%ers had a code of conduct same as you did when you were a soldier: we live free and we die free."

"What about the law?"

"The law exists for citizens," Slaughter told him. "And now, out here, they're ain't no fucking law, so I fit right in, man."

At the gates, Slaughter blew the locks off so the old man wouldn't have to climb back over which was how he'd exacerbated his leg injuries in the first place.

"Nice looking ride you got there, son," Rice said when he saw the hardtail.

“She gets the job done.”

They climbed on and Slaughter took them on down the road, showing the old man exactly what his scoot could do when called upon to eat some street.

Chapter Seven

Rice directed them off of 94 onto a dusty secondary road and Slaughter took it slowly, avoiding all the potholes and dips. The sun rose higher as he followed it, and was hot against the back of his neck. In the bitch seat, the old man said nothing and that was fine because there was nothing worse than having some needledick on the back that couldn't hold his mud. It fucked up the whole experience of being one with the wind.

As he grannyed the hog along in low gear, Slaughter watched the countryside roll by. Acres and acres of farmland burnt yellow by the summer sun and unrelieved by a single drop of rain. Even the ditches were dry, the cattails withered and drooping. His mouth tasted like dry wheat chaff, his skin layered in dust. Just miles of farmland. Repetitive. Monotonous. Got under your skin after a time. All those fields and pastures, nothing to break it up but tired-looking silos, collapsing barns, farmhouses weathered as gray as tombstones.

He started, thinking about the Deadlands again because that's what he wanted, not this, not this rural ma-and-pa shit. Even despite that woman in the lab back at the compound, he wanted it. He wanted to go out there and get in the thick of it.

But the old man's nice, he told himself, *so be nice back. He offers you supper and a bed, take it. He needs help with something, help him. He's a citizen but he's okay.*

They came around a wild stand of honeysuckle and black cherry that blocked their view and the first thing they saw was the screaming man. He was down on his knees, shirt soaked bright red with blood, and two zombies were standing over him. They had knives and they were using them, almost playfully slashing him to death. They took their time, slitting off his nose, hacking off an ear, taking a few fingers from an upraised hand. The wormboy on the right didn't have a face as such, just a swollen, perforated

mass that oozed a black jelly; the one on the left had a face, but most of it was hanging off the gray, maggoty skull beneath by strings of gristle.

“Better get your widowmaker ready,” Rice said, still holding his empty shotgun.

Slaughter figured he was right because there was no way they were going to get around this scene, so they might as well join the dance and lighten the earth of a few more walking corpses.

He parked the bike off the shoulder and right away he could smell the stink of putrescence. The two zombies paid them little attention, but kept at their butchering until their victim curled up in the dusty road like a dead snake. Standing just off a ways was an old woman in a frayed calico dress, dark stains all over the bosom, a morbid fungi growing up the sleeves and collar line, settling around her throat in a furry scarf. Some kind of grave mold had grown out of her nostrils and eaten away one side of her face like an ulcer.

“That’s Iris McClew,” Rice said, fighting the urge to take his hat off in the presence of a lady. “I’ll be damned. She had the farm down the road from mine. She’s been in the ground a month. Worms must have found her.”

Slaughter studied her.

She must have been a real pistol in life, wound tighter than a corset, a real terror by the looks of her: acid-tongued, opinionated, intolerant, a bible-thumping spinster who’d gone to the grave with her legs crossed and virginity intact. She still carried some of that and you could see it in her one good eye…even though it was filmed yellow.

“This is no concern of yours, George Rice,” she said in a cracking, dry voice. “I would ask you to mind your own business.”

“Like you ever minded yours,” Rice told her.

She gave him a wicked glare, still uppity and proud, a prayer book in one hand and a basket in the other. She raised the prayer book above her head, filled with righteous condemnation. “The Lord has prepared a burning place for thee!” she said, flies exiting her mouth. “And down onto the grass of thy host shall ye go! Amen, amen!”

Rice ignored her as one of the zombies came stumbling over in his direction, the one whose face wasn’t much more than black jelly. He tried to say something but all that came out was more of that black drainage. Slaughter shot him first in the belly and he opened up, viscera spilling down to his knees in unsightly tangles like his abdomen had just burst a seam.

Slaughter shot him next in the head, killshot, vaporizing everything from the eyes on up in a fine meaty spray. He took two or three comical steps forward, then rolled into the ditch where he did not move again.

The other zombie came at them. He still had his gore-encrusted knife and he planned on using it. “Gonna cut off yer balls, son,” he said to Slaughter. “Then I’m gonna roast ‘em on a stick like marshmellers.”

“Like hell,” the biker told him.

He sighted and jerked the trigger on the .357 Combat Mag. It went off like a cannon, echoing through the fields and shaking birds out of trees. The effect of a 158 grain .357 slug at such close range was devastating: it cored the zombie right between the eyes and with such force and velocity that it split his head in two like a ripe muskmelon. He hit the road flopping.

“Hmmmph,” said Iris McClew, indignant as always, it would appear. She crouched down next to the murdered man. Taking a fine carving knife from her basket, she slit him open and began stuffing his entrails in her basket. While Slaughter and Rice watched, she slit out a nice flank of liver and shoved it in her mouth, gore dropping from her lips.

After she swallowed, she shook a bloody finger at Slaughter. “You have not the gumption to raise that firearm at me, sir! For your place is known and in it ye shall lay! A gentlemen would not brandish a weapon at a lady!”

“I ain’t no gentleman.”

She laughed with a bubbling, liquid sort of sound. “I know you! *We* all know you! *You* bear the mark! *You* have been named!”

“Hell, you going on about, Iris?” Rice asked her.

But she only laughed as if she knew something they did not and maybe she did at that.

Slaughter shot her dead and that was that.

“Too bad,” Rice said. “She was a real stick in life and she still had it going on in death. Too bad.”

Slaughter didn’t comment on that.

When they rose back up he stopped thinking about who or what they had been. Walking death was walking death. It was a pestilence and you eradicated it and that’s all there really was to it.

Regardless, what she had said haunted him. *I know you! We all know you! You bear the mark! You have been named!* What mark and named by whom? He didn’t like it. He tried to tell himself that Iris McClew’s brain had gone to rice pudding, but he could not make himself believe it. First the

mysterious face on the video back at the compound (*Black Hat,* as Slaughter now referred to him) and now that shit Iris said. Why did he have the most terrible feeling that it was connected? That taken separately, each incident was a horror, but together they were prophetic?

The farm was just up the road. A barn thirsty for a coat of paint, an old silo, a broken down farmhouse. Typical of the countryside. This was the face the Midwest showed the world these days.

Slaughter got the old man inside and like he'd figured, Rice wanted him to stay for supper and spend the night, which was okay. Why not kick it for a night, work out the kinks? Besides, Rice seemed cool for a citizen and maybe he'd have some good war stories. The farmhouse was a real mess with tools spread around, green metal boxes of U.S. Army ordinance, racks of rifles, survival gear, you name it. It definitely lacked a woman's touch. The windows were all boarded-up and gunports were cut into them.

Rice found his cane and hobbled around okay with it. "Why don't you take care of your ride and I'll get us something to eat," he said.

So Slaughter did just that.

* * *

He parked his hardtail out in the barn, loving the sweet smell of all that dry hay in there. It reminded him of raw-dogging Dirty Mary out in the barn after some violent foreplay. But he didn't want to think too much about any of that so he did some maintenance on the scoot and then went back inside.

The old man had boiled water on the stove and drawn him a bath in an old tub which at first got Slaughter to thinking: *I smell that bad?* But he couldn't remember the last time he'd cleaned up so he got in there, scrubbing and soaping and sudsing the dirt and grease from his hair and beard. He spent a good hour in there, just resting in the warm water and drifting off again and again. When he woke, Rice had washed his clothes—jeans and socks, shorts and oily denim vest—in an old wringer washer and dried them over the stove. Slaughter was grateful…except for his rags, his colors, he hadn't washed them in a long time thinking that it was only the dirt and patches that held them together.

By the time he got dressed and had a leisurely cigarette out on the back porch, noticing with interest that Rice had dug a trench around the farm as sort of a defensive perimeter, there was a meal spread out on the table.

Potatoes, smoked ham, even some bread and fresh beans. It was good stuff and Slaughter knocked away about three plates until it felt like he was about nine months along.

“You’re heading out in the morning, I assume?” the old man asked him.

“Yeah, I got places to go.”

“You could stay, you know.”

“Sure, I know. But you’d get sick of me before long. I’m not much good when I’m pent up in one place for too long. I get some real badass PMS after awhile.”

Rice raised an eyebrow. “PMS?”

“Parked Motorcycle Syndrome.”

They had a laugh over that and it felt pretty good to laugh, Slaughter figured. It had been so long now he couldn’t seem to remember how at first…but then it came, a smile, a widening grin, then it just rolled out and he realized that he hadn’t much laughed with Dirty Mary, things were always too tense, way too much poison in the air, but with Rice it was easy. Just like it had been easy back in Pittsburgh at the clubhouse with the rest of the boys when they got together for some drinking and card playing or went to Church, which was what they called their monthly meeting.

Rice told a few jokes after that and kept things going, then soon enough he brought out a jug of corn mash and they took one pull after the other until they were nicely lit up and laughing about just about everything and it was nice. Slaughter figured if he could take away anything from this day it should be the memory of drinking with the old man because it was something good, something real, a connection made between them. Something golden he could hold onto when things weren’t so bright in the gray winding days ahead.

Soon enough, though, Rice started asking about things. “None of my business and that’s for sure, but I gotta ask you, son, I just have to: what do you hope to accomplish out in the Deadlands? What do you hope to achieve besides your own death?”

“I already told you that. I’m going to kill zombies.”

“And that’s all?”

“What more could there be?”

But Rice wasn’t having that and he sure as hell wasn’t believing it. “I guess I’m wondering what you left back east that makes you so desperate to push west.”

“Let’s just say I got my reasons,” Slaughter told him, wondering then how much he should be saying about any of it. “There’s people that would like to put me in a cage, but I don’t think they’ll come after me in the Deadlands. And while I go to ground, as they say, I can be a serious thorn in the side of the walking dead.”

“I suppose you can at that,” Rice shrugged. “But if it’s the Deadlands you want, you got your heart set on that cold lick of hell, you might as well wait right here. They’re saying the Deadlands start on the other side of the Mississip, but don’t you believe it. They’re pushing farther east every day, inch by inch.”

“I bet they are.” Slaughter thought about that a moment. “Let me ask you a crazy question. You ever seen or heard of a guy in a black hat? Real ugly, face dead-white and scarred-up. Pink eyes.”

“No, think I’d remember somebody like that. Why?”

Slaughter just shrugged. “Got me a funny feeling our paths are going to cross.”

“I know something else that might interest you, though.”

“What’s that?”

Rice licked his weathered lips. “A bike gang. What you would call a club. I seen some of them riding through. Dead ones. But they wear colors like you—leather vests, denim vests…says Kansas City on ‘em, I think. Couldn’t make out the rest on account I was keeping my head low and out of harm’s way.”

“Cannibal Corpse,” Slaughter said.

“Good name for what they are. You know ‘em?”

Slaughter snorted a cold laugh. “You could say that. Like ten miles of bad road or ten years of hard time, I know ‘em. They’ve been trying to push east for years. My club and a few others like the Outlaws stopped them from doing so. Now they’re all zombies and the old boys are all dead or like them. Nothing to stop them. Nothing but me.”

“Is that what you plan on doing in the Deadlands?”

“Part of it. The ones you saw were outriders out scoping things. They’ll keep coming in packs like that. Back in the day, the Corpse were in Missouri and Kansas, thick as shit-flies in St. Louis and Jefferson City, Springfield and Kansas City. We fought them out there and we fought them as far east as Ohio and Pennsylvania. But they just kept coming. This time,

there’s no law to stand in my way and I’m going to send ‘em back to the grave where they belong.”

“Sounds like you got a score to settle, son.”

Slaughter managed something like a smile. “I do. The Kansas City chapter president was a maggot they called Coffin. He ordered the murders of three Disciples. The shiteater who carried it out was a psychopath name of Reptile. I want both of them in the worst way.”

“Maybe you’ll get a medal for that.”

“Probably a good beating and a prison cell if I get dragged back east.”

Rice fell into silence for a time. “I thought about it, you know.”

“Thought about what?”

“Going back east.”

“But…?”

He sighed. “I decided it wasn’t worth it. My whole command got wiped out. I’d be in for the shit. I’d rate a desk job if I was lucky. Better off to spend my remaining time out here in the wild west.”

“But it wasn’t your fault what happened,” Slaughter told him and meant it. “None of it.”

“Thanks, son. But they wouldn’t see it that way, those brass hats and stiff dicks out in Washington. They’d hang me out to dry. None of them have ever seen eight or nine-hundred zombies coming at them in waves. They couldn’t understand. They’d say I should have known better than to get bottled-up in a place like Freemont.”

Slaughter lit a cigarette. “I was there.”

“Freemont?”

“Yeah, lots of skeletons.”

“Sure enough. Those were my boys.” Rice’s eyes misted a moment. “I scavenged what I could from there for weeks, but I haven’t been there in a couple years now.”

“Nothing there but skeletons.”

“No hardware?”

“None.”

Rice said he couldn’t understand it, that there’d been APCs and Stryker vehicles.

“Somebody took ‘em then,” he said. “Maybe the Red Hand.”

Slaughter figured that’s probably who it was. The idea of the Ratbags with fifty cal. machine guns and rocket launchers, armor-piercing shells and

anti-tank missiles was a scary thing.

“Saw a helicopter last week, Blackhawk by the looks of it,” Rice said. “It was heading due west. Probably reconnaissance, spotting Red Hand and zombie hotspots.”

Slaughter didn’t care for that much. A chopper? Way out here? The word back east was that the Army was going to push west but nobody really believed it. Maybe it was so. He highly doubted the military would come after him. Still, it worried him. Maybe it was just egotism whispering in his ear, telling him they *had* to be coming after him because he was John fucking Slaughter, cop killer and notorious outlaw biker and all around bad boy. A wanted man. But he didn’t believe that.

The old man locked down the doors and went off to bed and Slaughter stayed up. He went out on the back porch and watched a light rain fall, thinking about that interstate out there calling to him.

Chapter Eight

Like the bloodthirsty redskins in an old movie, the zombies came at dawn. Rice saw them marching down the road, forty or fifty of them, and there was no doubt where they were headed. They came up the drive carrying axes and pipes and broomsticks sharpened like spears.

“Looks like we’re in for a siege,” Rice said.

He broke out the rifles—nice lever action .30-30s—boxes of ammunition and single-shot Snakecharmer shotguns for back up.

“Headshots, son,” Rice said. “We conserve ammo that way. Just drop ‘em and move onto the next kill.”

They came on thick with stink and flies, bits of them dropping off in their wild flight at the farmhouse. Rice opened up first, then Slaughter started popping off rounds, shooting, levering, shooting again, dropping the dead in their tracks. Zombie heads came apart in meaty, gushing sprays of putrescence and soon the puddles outside were dark with blood and fluids and bits of tissue…and worms, of course, because as soon as the bodies went down, the worms crawled out, searching for something else to infest and finding only broken husks.

Though the dead were not exactly smart by any shakes, most of them anyway, they were smart enough to soon realize that their numbers were being dropped by rounds fired from the gunports, so they attacked these with fury.

The wormboys came on, charging the gunports, hitting them with their pipes and chewing up the boards with their axes and, when that failed, pressing in and digging their hands through the slots.

Slaughter kept darting from gunport to gunport, popping off rounds until the dead congested again and moving on to the next slot. When they thickened he drew the .410 Snakecharmer and blasted away at them again and again.

But then some crafty little kid zombie crept up under the gunport, reached up and got his or her hand around the barrel and would not let go. Slaughter yanked and yanked, banging the kid off the outside of the farmhouse with moist, mushy sounds and spraying a lot of decay and goo around, but by then two or three adults had the Snakecharmer and pulled it right through the port, tossing it away into the muddy drive.

Slaughter knew that wasn't a mistake he could afford to make again.

He dropped a little boy that brandished a bone.

He dropped a man with a hatchet.

He dropped twin girls with kitchen knives.

Still they came on, rushing the ports in crazy human—or *in*human—wave attacks.

He put down three more and was amazed that they did not follow their usual behavioral patterns and stop to feed on their own dead. They always had before, scavenging for scraps.

But this time they were interested only in getting at Slaughter and Rice.

A woman with a sloughing skin speckled with purple blotches took three rounds from Slaughter's .30-30, shots to the torso to drive her back so he could get a clear headshot. But she just kept coming on. Her breasts burst open like balloons filled with rancid milk and her belly split open releasing a tide of foul gray slime, but all that did was piss her off.

He finally got a bead on her and took her down with a headshot that made her scream and gurgle, vomiting out gouts of something like white glistening cheese curds. But it didn't go the way he wanted. Not in the least. Even with her face shot off and the side of her head hanging by a few threads of gristle, she propelled herself at the gunport with incredible velocity and struck it like a swollen bladder filled with rot, smashing into it, wedging her flabby arm in there, corpse jelly flooding through the port and slopping down the wall.

"Never seen 'em come like this!" Rice called out. "Not since Freemont!"

He kept shooting and Slaughter did the same until his ammunition was sorely depleted. And by then there were maggoty arms reaching through the ports and several enterprising wormboys or wormgirls were shoving a bloated, blackened infant through one of them. Something with a mouth like a lamprey filled with tiny sharp teeth.

Slaughter blew it back out with five or six shots and then, from the kitchen, they heard a constant thumping and pounding that could only be

axes cutting into the door.

They heard it split open.

“I got this!” Rice called, hobbling off into the kitchen and Slaughter kept shooting until he had less than a half a box of shells and the .30-30 was smoking hot in his hands, the air thick with the stink of burnt gunpowder.

And outside, Jesus, the dead piled in heaps and ramparts as more and more rushed in. The thirty or forty Rice had spied coming down the road had not only doubled but tripled, then quadrupled.

There was no way in hell they could hold off an army like this.

That’s when Rice screamed.

Slaughter ran in there just in time to see what remained of the door bursting off its hinges as seven or eight axe-wielding zombies pushed in on a hot putrid wave. He dropped three of them but the others just poured right over the top and Rice was buried in their numbers, shrieking and kicking as they bit into him.

Slaughter ran.

He looked back once and Rice, poor goddamned Rice, they had him in their filthy hands and a young girl opened her mouth inches from Rice’s own and a twisting red worm came out in a slushy bile and slithered right up his left nostril.

The zombies came after Slaughter.

He killed three more, then he was out of shot.

He made ready to die a horrible death.

And then…just as they closed in for the kill…there was a rumbling sound of heavy engines from outside followed by the clatter of heavy machine guns, the thump of grenades and mortar rounds. The farmhouse shook. It shook again. Slaughter was thrown off his feet and the zombies were cast like dice as an artillery round punched into the kitchen and blasted it into wreckage.

Cavalry…the fucking cavalry is here.

But as to whether that was the U.S. Army or the Red Hand with purloined APCs and ordinance from the 25th Infantry, he did not know. Either way, he figured it would be trouble for him.

Boom, boom, boom.

More shells landed. A great section of ceiling collapsed, burying the zombies that had managed to pull themselves up. Even then, they struggled in the debris. Slaughter dusted himself off and pulled himself up to a

gunport and saw the action out there. There were four or five wheeled armored vehicles that had encircled the farmhouse. With mounted fifty caliber machine guns, they were chopping up the zombies into gore and gristle. They launched mortar rounds. Built-in flamethrowers on their front ends gushed out twenty and thirty-foot flames that lit up the walking dead like match heads, incinerating them into stumbling blackened husks.

And the rounds came whistling through the air.

Incoming.

Slaughter dove to the floor as anti-tank shells hit the farmhouse and the wall across the room disintegrated into a rain of burning shards and plaster dust and flaming refuse.

The next volley would bring the whole goddamn farmhouse down and he knew it.

He crawled across the floor, kicked through some lathing and loose singed planks, and dove out into the yard, crab-crawling until he saw dead zombies and worms crawling in the grass. He found his feet, running for cover behind a tree as more anti-tank rounds hit the farmhouse and there was a great hot whooshing of air and the farmhouse collapsed like a house of cards, sending up plumes of fire and rolling clouds of black smoke that blew through the farm yard.

Still clutching the spent .30-30, he used the smoke as cover as the armored vehicles moved in, pounding away with their big fifties, lighting up the remains of the farmhouse with their flamethrowers and cremating anything that still had the will to walk.

A zombie came at him out of the smoke and Slaughter smashed the stock of the .30-30 into its face. He broke open the head of a little boy, jumped through a ring of naked women with burning hairdos and drop-kicked a man chewing on his own entrails.

The barn.

He threw the door open and was glad his saddlebags were packed. He had to move. Those guns would be trained on the barn and silo next and he had to be out of there. He fired up the hog and with all the noise from outside, her roaring straight pipes sounded like the purr of a kitten. A zombie that was on fire stepped through the doorway, but by then Slaughter had popped his scoot into gear and throttled up. The hog jumped forward, knocking the zombie aside.

Already Slaughter could taste the freedom of the road.

Outside, not only the razed structure of the farmhouse was burning, but so were the trees and outbuildings, and even the meadows and fields, smoke tangling in the air that was acrid with the stink of smoldering human flesh. It was a crazy ride, zigzagging through the flames and debris and heaped bodies, trying to avoid the notice of the gunners on the armored vehicles. He worked the clutch and throttle all the way, using every trick he knew, carving his path hard and fast, taking sharp corners with the bike nearly horizontal to the ground and then he was flying down the drive and out onto the rutted road.

Not that he escaped unnoticed, for a few mortar rounds exploded in his path far behind him, nearly throwing him off the bike, but then he was on the road and there were no citizens ahead and he figured he had it and he owned it.

Go west, my brother.

Chapter Nine

Fifteen minutes later he sighted the big slab, that beautiful winding snake of pavement known as the I and he squealed onto it, taking the humps and bumps standing straight up with his boots on the footpegs. The exhilaration was such that he felt like opening the old hog up and doing a little trick riding like squatting no hands on the seat or steering with his feet…but no, that was crazy old bullshit from the crazy old days of bullshit that no longer existed.

And he had to get his ass far and away.

The bike roared under him as he took the I mile by mile, the wind blowing his hair back and parting his shaggy beard, making his face sting and his eyes water. Shit, yes. A few bugs slapped his cheeks and forehead and that was all part of it.

He had not felt so free in years.

He thought about Rice for a moment. He was a good guy for a citizen. He could have been a good biker. Too bad. At least he'd been burned up back there and wouldn't have to wander around with a worm sliding around in his brain making him go cannibal. It wasn't much, but it was something. At least the old man had been spared that.

Slaughter thought no more about it.

He was feeling really good, really charged, still buzzing from the action. He had that feel-good sort of soul rapture, that pure euphoria he only got after a good conflict. It was like coming down from tripping your brains out on the good stuff. It reminded him of that field event back in the good old days in Harrisburg. The Disciples were there, along with members of the Outlaws and Pagans, the Warlocks and the Dirty Dozen, countless other clubs big and small. Slaughter and Jumbo, Neb and Apache Dan were barrel riding on their bikes, getting low down and crazy, their minds blown clean on tabs of Red Dragon.

That’s exactly how he felt now: free without a care. The way a patched-in outlaw biker was supposed to feel: high and proud and randy in the saddle. That was the tribal lifestyle—who rode the best, who fucked more women, who kicked more ass. Absolutely primal, the barbarian life.

The only thing that brought him down was that he could not share it with any of his brothers of the Disciples Nation.

On the good side, the I was clean; there were very few wrecks and absolutely no citizens. That was one good thing that had come out of the Outbreak, it kept the citizens off the road with their cages, cleared away the rice rockets and weekenders.

The sun was getting warm, burning off the morning mist, and he could feel it warming up his arms and all that intricate inking—the snakes and skulls, dragons and tombstones, the bright red swastikas on each bicep overlaying the serpents and gargoyles beneath, the black SS deathshead on the back of his left hand.

He was feeling good about things, starting to think that—

Wait a minute now.

Wait a fucking minute.

In the distance he could see something. And not just one thing but many. Vehicles. They weren’t wrecks. They were heading in his direction at full steam. He popped the clutch and decelerated, slowing until he came to a stop. He dug in his saddlebag and pulled out the Minox binoculars, held them to his eyes and tightened the field…shit and shit. Those were Hummers. Military Humvees.

He had a sudden bad feeling about things, which became even worse when he heard the *thunk-thunk-thunk* of the chopper as it came over the tree line in the distance, sweeping through the sky above him.

He had to get off the I.

He throttled up, cutting across fields of yellow grass and stunted corn, over humps and down into little vales, pushing along, giving the hog some speed but not so much that he’d lose her on the uneven terrain. Any thought he’d had that it was all purely coincidental vanished when the chopper passed overhead again, and behind him the Hummers entered the field as well, pushing forward in a solid line, chewing through the corn like harvesters.

Fuck.

They had his number.

He gunned up a hill, came out on a gravel road and opened the bike up, wary of a skid, but knowing he had to get some real estate between him and the Hummers. That chopper kept circling overhead. It was eyeing him and unless he could get to some cover, some trees, it was all over with. He kept riding, throwing a contrail of dust behind him.

The gravel road wound out through open country and that was bad. In the distance it entered a pine thicket. If he could just make it into the trees he might have a chance. He throttled up a bit, gaining speed and momentum. In the rearview he could see that the Hummers were on the road, too, coming fast.

He cut onto a side road that circled through some heavier brush and then onto a footpath. Up a hill, down another, over a footbridge and then off the path into the grass again, finding what looked like a dry ravine bedded by flat sandstone. He followed it, nearing the pine thicket and knowing he just wasn't going to make it. Overhead, the helicopter came veering down in a strafing run. He heard the *crack! crack!* of a high-powered rifle. Bullets thudded into the stones around him, splitting some in two with little puffs of rock dust. The rifle kept firing and the rounds landed in front of him, behind him, to either side.

They could have pegged you if they wanted, Slaughter thought as he pulled up out of the ravine and cut onto the gravel road again. *They're herding you. They want you alive.*

He decided he would not make it easy on them, whoever in the hell they were. His scoot could go places they couldn't and once he got into the trees the helicopter would be useless. First, he had to *get* into the trees, though. And once he was there, if it came down to it…he would fight to the end.

Okay. Not far now.

Maybe five minutes.

The Hummers were closing and he couldn't throttle the hog any more or he was going to spill her. The road was rough and potholed, the gravel was loose. Things like that meant nothing to the Hummers, of course. They poured it on even more. And here came that fucking chopper again, the gunner firing off rounds, throwing lead like rice at a wedding: *crack! crack! ca-rack!*

But there was the thicket beyond…cool, shadowy depths where he could fade.

It was going to work.

He was almost there.

And that was the point at which everything went right straight to hell because out of the thicket came another Hummer straight at him and there was a gunner with a mounted recoilless rifle just waiting for the order. Slaughter knew the weapon well. Back in the days before he earned his Disciples patch when he was a grunt he had shot one. 106mm. It would make scrap metal of the hog and turn Slaughter himself into a greasy smear of gore.

They had him bottled.

He didn’t have a chance to decelerate. He swung the bike to the left and the culvert he hadn’t noticed in the heavy growth came up at him and the bike thumped into it, went up in the air like a rocket and Slaughter was thrown twenty feet, rolling through the grass.

When he came to his senses, soldiers with M16A2s were bearing down on him and he stood up slowly, hands over his head.

“DOWN! DOWN! DOWN!” one of them screamed at him. “EAT THAT GROUND, MOTHERFUCKER!”

“Slow down, man, you got me,” Slaughter said, cool and easy.

Then they came up behind him and knocked him to the ground with their rifle butts and then they were kicking him. Sometime during the process, he rolled over cold as canned fish, thoughts rolling through his mind of the big bad west, the Deadlands, the Rockies, and the Pacific Ocean on the other side.

He fell into a dream where he was swimming in the night sea.

Chapter Ten

Who they were and what they wanted, he did not learn. When Slaughter woke up, he was in a hole. It took some time to come around and make sense of his surroundings because he kept slipping in and out of consciousness. They'd given him a good beating and everything hurt. Everything ached. But when his head finally cleared, he saw that he was indeed in a hole. A perfectly round shaft like a sewer with earthen walls and a rough woolen blanket beneath him. It smelled like piss and blood because he'd been pissing himself and bleeding, maybe pissing blood, too.

About eight feet up there was a grate. The whole thing looked like a pit they kept POWs in from one of those Chuck Norris movies where they free the MIAs in Vietnam or something. Crazy ass shit, but that was the reality of it.

He was in a pit.

Naked.

Bruised and bloodied.

Thirsty.

Hungry.

That first day and into the second he kept calling up to the soldiers he saw peeking through the grating but they ignored him. Only when he started calling their mothers names did he get a short, *Fuck off!* But that was it. At night it got cold and he shivered in his blanket. During the day the sun streamed down on him and he sweated. There were bugs, too. Black beetles that nipped. They kept him in the hole for a week. He lived in there. Pissed in there. Shit in there. Slept in his own waste like an animal. Twice a day they'd lower down food—a tin cup of water, some bread, a few scraps of meat—and on the third day, he grabbed the rope and nearly pulled the soldier down in there with him, which would have been fun, because he would have killed that fucking G.I. Joe, snapped his neck and gouged out

his eyes, taken his weapon and blown away anyone that looked down into the pit. Of course, these were soldiers or cops or both, and they would have tossed tear gas down at him, or maybe a grenade.

Problem solved.

After that little play he got no food or water for two days. That's when he stopped acting like a cunning animal and starting acting like a thinking man. If they had wanted him dead, he would *be* dead. That's not what they wanted at all. This was psychological bullshit and he recognized it as such. They were pushing him to the limits of human endurance the way sadistic guards did with captured soldiers. They were trying to break him. They wanted him to beg for mercy.

That just showed how stupid they were, how they did not know him.

But it was a game and he would play. He honestly did not know if this was about those killings in New Castle, but he knew that in time they would show their hand. But he had to *make* them do it. And to do that he had to sit silent and take whatever they gave him but never, ever show weakness or beg for mercy.

Let them make the first overture.

Let them show their hand.

The longer he thought about it, the more it began to make sense to him. They had brought him here for a reason. It was not some accidental or coincidental thing where they just happened to grab him on a raid. They came down on him, rode herd on him, spent a lot of time and resources trying to bring him in. If he was just another thug, why waste the time? They would have killed him and left his corpse bleeding out in the sun.

No, they wanted something.

But they wanted to break him first.

On the fifth day, he knew that to be certain, for a voice called down to him, "Hey, Slaughter? You need anything?"

"No. I'm good."

"Okay, smartass. You had you chance."

In other words, *you had your chance to beg.* Okay. So if they spent all that time and manpower to bring in just one man—him—then that meant that not only did they want something, but time was probably a factor, too. He kept that in mind.

On the evening of the sixth day, the voice came again: "Slaughter? You cooperate and I can get you out of there."

“That’s okay. I like it down here.”

Whoever that voice belonged to, they went away swearing under their breath. And as Slaughter lay there in his own waste, his skin paling, bug bites all over him, his ribs beginning to make themselves known, he started to realize that as miserable as he was—and oh Christ Jesus, was he ever fucking *miserable*—that the tables were starting to turn. That he was learning this psychological game and playing it against them…whoever *them* were.

Wait it out, man.

Just fucking wait it out.

They went to a lot of trouble, and each day this goes on is probably fouling them up. Let them get desperate. Real desperate. Because they will.

You’ll see.

Then on the seventh afternoon, the voice: “You wanna come out of there, Slaughter? You wanna come up and talk business? Take a shower? Get some clothes? Have some food?”

And in Slaughter’s own mind, a voice cried out from absolute broken desperation, *Yes! Oh God, yes! Please, please, please let me out of here!* But he did not give that voice vent. In fact, he said nothing. Nothing at all. He did not even move.

“Slaughter?”

No answer.

“Slaughter?”

Silence.

“Goddammit, Slaughter!” the voice shouted, and he could tell by the tone that it was used to shouting and used to getting answered when it did so. *“Slaughter? Sonofabitch.”* The owner stomped away and started bitching at one of the soldiers. “Has he been like that all day?”

“He’s always like that, sir.”

“He hasn’t spoken?”

“He never speaks, sir.”

“Shit. All right. Get his ass out of there.”

“Now, sir?”

“No, a week from fucking Tuesday, you meathead. Yes, *now.”*

And that’s what they did. They lowered a sling and Slaughter just laid there like he was too sick to move because that was his latest trump card. A couple of lowly privates climbed down into that filthy shit-stinking hole and

lifted him onto the sling, bitching and complaining the entire time. When he was brought up, they had medics with a stretcher waiting. He wanted to scream for joy at being out in the world again. He saw that he was in some sort of military compound, Quonset huts and drab gray buildings, lots of jarheads scurrying about.

“Slaughter?”

The voice belonged to some round little man in khakis who did not look military at all. More like a CEO with his white coiffed hair and shiny pink cheeks: overfed and overpaid.

“I could use a shower,” Slaughter said.

He took two showers as a matter of fact. The medics gave him cream for the insect bites, then they put him in a room with a bed. They gave him fatigues to wear, fried chicken and potatoes to eat, an apple crumb for dessert, and ice cold water to drink. When he was done with that he ordered two cheeseburgers and a chocolate shake. He wanted to keep eating but he’d figured he’d burst so he took a nap.

When he woke up, his clothes were waiting for him: clean, freshly folded. His black jeans, scuffed motorcycle boots, and even his rags, his colors. He pulled them on and was amazed that his club vest had withstood two washings in as many weeks and not fallen apart.

He found his cigarettes on the nightstand and smoked.

Then he waited for it.

About an hour later, two MPs came for him. “All right,” one of them said, “come with us. It’s time.”

“Time for what, friend?”

“You’ll see, dipshit.”

* * *

They took him to the round little man who said his name was Colonel Brightman. Brightman made no claim of being in the Army or Marines or any of that, and Slaughter pegged him right off as a spook. He had that look about him, like he might suck the blood out of his own mother. Slaughter sat in a metal folding chair across from him and listened to him go on about it all, about the threat to the country and the awful possibility that if the worm rains weren’t contained, the Deadlands would reach clear across to the Atlantic.

“Something has to be done,” he said. “Something…decisive.”

“How did you find me?” Slaughter finally asked.

“We took in some boys from the Red Hand. They said some biker had torn them a new asshole at a farmhouse in St. Croix County. We tied that in with reports of some hellraiser wearing the colors of the Devil’s Disciples burning a path west. After that, it was easy enough. We knew you were with Rice at his farm. You were seen.”

“So you set up a little net?”

“That’s it.” But Brightman was not interested in any of that and he waved it away. “As I was saying, we need decisive action on the worm rain issue. Something has to be done to save the country.”

Slaughter lapsed into silence again. If Brightman wanted him to jump up and salute and wave his fucking flag, he had the wrong guy.

“It’s not by accident we brought you in, Slaughter.”

“I was kind of figuring that.”

“And it wasn’t by accident that we threw you in that hole out there.”

“I figured that, too.”

Brightman just stared at him, dabbing sweat from his face with a hankie. “Did you?”

Slaughter allowed himself a sarcastic laugh. “You think I was born yesterday, citizen? I know how shit works. You were trying to break me down, trying to get me begging for release. And you did that because you wanted me to be desperate, to get me down on your terms so you could spring it on me and I’d bite like a good little soldier.”

“Spring what?”

Slaughter pulled off his cigarette. “Yeah, what exactly.” He shook his head. “All right, citizen. Let’s play cat-and-mouse until you get the nuts to tell me what’s on your mind. Let’s play it like that.”

“You killed two cops in New Castle, PA,” Brightman said then. “You murdered an innocent woman.”

“If you say so.”

“Quit the shit, Slaughter. You left your goddamn prints all over everything, and you did it specifically so that everyone would know what happens to enemies of the Devil’s Disciples. Am I right on this?”

“Damn right,” Slaughter said. “Those cops murdered my brother Neb in cold blood. I saw it happen. He gave ‘em no shit, and he wasn’t armed. They pulled their pieces and put him down like a fucking dog, so I returned

the favor. Two less shit-eating cops in the world. So what? And that woman? Not so fucking innocent, citizen. She rolled over. She dropped a dime on Neb. She fingered him to the cops and that brought about his death. She deserved what she got."

"She deserved to be…gutted?"

"You're fucking right she did, citizen. The lowest of the low: a rat."

Brightman just sighed and shook his head. "I'm trying real hard here, Slaughter, to see you as a stand-up guy with some twisted, convoluted sense of underworld honor and not some dirty bloodthirsty animal."

Slaughter just laughed. "You don't know shit."

"Don't I?"

"No, you don't. Just as you have your laws, citizen, we've got ours. You're good to us, we're better to you. You shit on us, we bury you alive. Simple as that."

"Is it?"

"That's right," Slaughter said. "I'm your best friend or your worst enemy, but there's nothing in-between."

Brightman finally sat down. He did not look amused by any of it. "I talked with some gang experts back east, and they told me some things. They told me who you are and *what* you are. I know you, Slaughter. And I know you because I can read those tattoos you have. They tell me who you are, where you came from, what you did, and *who* you did. For example, I know that black diamond on your vest means that you've killed for the club. And I also know that the black Waffen SS deathshead on the back of your left hand indicates that you are a member of 158 Crew."

Slaughter smiled. Brightman *had* done his homework. The 158 Crew were an elite group of enforcers and contract killers within the Devil's Disciples. "158" was shorthand for "1958", the penal code of the federal statute given to "murder for hire."

"Okay, citizen. You got me. So show me the cheese and see if I nibble."

Brightman acted like he had no idea what the biker was talking about. He had a thick file on Slaughter, and it was pretty well-thumbed by the looks of it. "You've been a bad boy, Slaughter. Your sheet is longer than my left arm. Twelve county lockups on minor offenses ranging from disturbing the piece to street brawls to possession of a deadly weapon. Two years in SCI Frackville for aggravated assault. You split a guy's head open with… let's see here…" he paged through the file "…a *monkey wrench?* I like that.

Three more in Yardville for battery of a police officer. This one's better. There's a little notation here. Apparently the cop was a narc and he caught you flushing packets of meth down the toilet. When he tried to stop you, you beat him so badly he spent six weeks in the hospital. Nice, real nice. Only reason you didn't get twenty years on that is because that idiot came in without a search warrant and you, being the good upstanding citizen you are, were only defending your life and property. Let's see…ten years at FCI Leavenworth for armed robbery…sentence commuted after two years. You got lucky on that one. Witnesses couldn't be sure it was you so your lawyer managed to have it overturned. Nice. I'm guessing your shithead club brothers had something to do with the hazy memories of those witnesses. What'd they do? Threaten to kill their kids? Rape their wives?" Brightman laughed. "At Yardville you were brought up on charges twice for stabbing other inmates with homemade knives…both times, charges thrown out for lack of witness corroboration. I like that. I'm guessing those other cons were scared to open their mouths. And look at this, another six convictions overturned or thrown out of court—gun running, narcotics distribution, murder conspiracy, assault with a deadly weapon, possession of explosives, grand theft." Brightman had himself a little laugh. "Slaughter you're nothing but a goddamned scab on society's ass."

"You got it, citizen."

"A parasite."

"Sure."

"A fucking predator."

"One-hundred percent. So throw me in a cell and get it done with so I don't have to listen to any more of your high-handed shit."

Brightman threw the file on his desk. "We're willing to pretend this file doesn't exist. We're willing to ignore the three bodies you left behind you in New Castle. In fact, we're willing to give you a clean slate if you're willing to play ball."

"Whose ball?"

"Mine," Brightman said, "and those I represent."

"Uh-huh. Go on."

Brightman finally got down to it. It was simple, really. Since it was already quite apparent by his path west that Slaughter was going into the Deadlands, they were going to clean his slate if he went in there not just to raise hell, but to achieve a very specific objective: to free a high-level

biologist being held by the Red Hand of Freedom in a fortress outside Devil's Lake, North Dakota. Grab her, bring her back. According to Brightman she was a former employee of the CDC that had been kidnapped out of Denver by the Red Hand. Her name was Katherine Isley, she held doctorates in virology and biogenetics, and she was the only one still living who knew the mathematical model for a synthetic biological agent that could zap the worms out of existence.

"What sort of agent?"

Brightman explained that Isley had been part of a team that produced an artificial virus loaded with a particular DNA sequence that would latch on to the reproductive cells of the worms and literally make them sterile. That would mean, in time, no more worms. The worms—origin unknown, Brightman claimed—followed a very peculiar life cycle. One out of every fifty reanimates (he disliked the word *zombie*) became something of a breeding ground for the worms themselves. What genetic or biochemical factors determined this were also unknown, only that they were always female. In a very strange biological ritual which was yet to be explained, the walking dead would choose a single female and disgorge their worms into her and die…given their rate of decay, most zombies only lasted so long. Several hundred worms usually parasitized a breeder (which, Slaughter figured, explained that girl on the video back at the compound: she was a breeder). The infestation went on until the worms completed their reproductive cycle. Like ordinary worms, they reproduced asexually by parthenogenesis—from unfertilized eggs. These pregnant worms would escape the host, swollen with eggs, and literally burst, each worm releasing thousands of eggs that were lighter than air because of hydrogen pockets within the cell membranes. The eggs then floated upwards, usually in great clusters of hundreds of thousands, and possibly even millions where they would gather in the lower troposphere, about fifteen kilometers up, and slowly mature. Rain was born in the troposphere and when a good cloudburst occurred, down came the worm larva, most less than an inch in length. The larva would seek hosts and reanimate them as cannibalistic corpses.

The cycle began anew.

Slaughter listened to this and he supposed that Brightman thought it was all beyond him, over the head of an outlaw biker, but the reverse was true. Slaughter's IQ had been tested by the prison psychologist at Leavenworth

and had been rated at 150, which was below genius level but well within the superior intelligence classification. In all his years in hardtime joints he'd read one book after the other so none of what the colonel was saying was incomprehensible to him. His brain worked just fine.

"So I hit the fortress, grab this woman and bring her back?"

"Essentially, yes."

"That's all there is to it?"

"Sure. If you survive the walking dead, assorted mutants, and the drifting clouds of fallout. Other than that, Slaughter, it's a cake walk."

"You're a funny guy."

Brightman told him that the fortress was a former NORAD complex that dated from the Cold War: three stories of steel-reinforced concrete, with another two levels below ground. It was, more or less, a bunker that had been appropriated by the Red Hand.

Slaughter chuckled. Lit another cigarette. "And you want me, some dirtbag biker, to play Delta Force and go on some kind of James Bond fucking commando raid? You're more fucked up than I am." He blew smoke out of his nostrils. "Why don't you send in special ops or something?"

"Because we don't want to waste them," Brightman said with all honesty. "The chances of success are very slim. No sense getting highly-trained soldiers killed when we've got people like you."

"And if I don't do this?"

"You'll either spend the rest of your life in a supermax prison or you'll go to the death house." Brightman smiled then, something better up his sleeve. "But there's more incentive…*John.* You don't mind me calling you John, do you?"

"Yeah, I do. That's what my friends call me. You can call me Slaughter."

Brightman was unperturbed. "As I said, there's more incentive. There's your brother to be considered."

Shit.

This was how they made it personal. Slaughter had one brother, Perry, who was known as Red Eye for the copious amounts of dope he used to smoke. He'd been a hang-around—a potential prospect for membership—with a few different small 1%er clubs out east, then drifted west to Illinois, got nailed on a few petty charges, did some county time, and the last

Slaughter had heard of him was that he was hooked up with some half-ass religious cult. That was Red Eye to the core: always looking for something.

Slaughter butted his cigarette. “All right, lay it on me.”

So Brightman did. Red Eye had been busted. The feds took him down on charges of treason, sedition, arms trafficking, and six counts of terrorism for plotting the military overthrow of Chicago with a fanatic known as The Puritan, who headed an ultra-right wing Christian fundamentalist militia known as the Legion of Terror. They were like the Seventh Day Adventists. With guns.

“Shit,” Slaughter sighed.

“Yes, shit indeed. He’s being held in a federal correctional institution.”

“And if I don’t play ball he stays there?”

“No, he gets the death penalty.”

Well, there you had it. Slaughter knew there had to be an agenda behind all the resources and manpower spent bringing him in and here it was. Not only an agenda, but one with serious incentives to back it up. There was no choice. Not really.

“He goes free if I do this?”

“He’ll do five years, maybe. But no more.”

“I suppose that’s something.”

Brightman leaned back in his chair. “From where you’re sitting, Slaughter, it’s everything. Your life. Your brother’s. You get Isley back and everything’s clean. If you don’t…scratch one brother.”

“What if this woman’s already dead?”

“Then bring us her corpse.”

“Shit.” Again, no choice. “So I have to go in there alone? One fucking man?”

“I wouldn’t even expect that of a murdering, raping animal like you, Slaughter,” Brightman explained. “I’ve put together a team for you. We’ve cleaned them out of prisons across the land just so you’ll have company.”

“A team?” Oh, this was going to be good.

Brightman thumbed a button on his intercom. Within seconds two soldiers with automatic weapons strolled in and behind them, chained together were some of the most vicious, degenerate criminal types that Slaughter had ever seen, and he knew each and every one of them. Brightman had secured the release of the remaining six members of the

Devil's Disciples. And here they were. All of them flying their colors, all of them grinning, and all of them looking for a good fight.

Slaughter figured they weren't going to be disappointed.

He started laughing. "The shit is on, my brothers."

* * *

The gang was all there: Irish, Moondog, Shanks, Apache Dan, Fish, and Jumbo. They'd been released from hardtime federal pens like Atlanta and Lewisburg, state hellholes like Rahway in New Jersey and SCI Greene in Pennsylvania. For the longest time—after he got Brightman out of his hair, that was—Slaughter just stood there staring at his brothers, blown away by it all, nearly beyond words. Seeing them, he was reminded of all the Disciples that had died during the Outbreak and in blood wars with other clubs.

Brightman let them have the conference room all to themselves and all the beer they wanted with the stipulation that they kept it *and* themselves in there and did not cause trouble elsewhere. So for the first hour or so as they put down the brew and exchanged war stories and tales of lock-up, they got caught up on things. In a lot of ways it was like Church, the monthly club meeting. They talked about Brothers like Cherry from the Pittsburgh chapter who'd thrown his bike on the I outside Altoona two months before the Outbreak. His funeral had turned into a drunken brawl. Slaughter learned that Charley Sweet from the Baltimore chapter had died in a shoot-out with the state police and two others—Creep and Toot—had died in a car crash while being pursued by ATF agents. Pegleg, who had first brought Slaughter into the club twenty odd years before, had died in Rahway from spiking some China White that had been more strychnine than heroin. The list went on and on.

There were so many gone that it became depressing.

If it hadn't have been for incarceration, Slaughter knew, the six Disciples with him would probably be dead, too.

Yeah, give three cheers for life in-stir, he thought.

What there was in that room was all that was left of the Devil's Disciples Nation: seven hard-living, hard-riding animals. This was his crew. At one time there'd been thirty guys in the Pittsburgh chapter alone and that, of

course, didn’t take in the Baltimore, Harrisburg, Youngstown, and Bayonne chapters, or the newer chapters in the UK and Denmark.

Seven fucking guys including me.

That’s it. No more. Probably never will be any more, he thought then. *And I have to lead them to their deaths so I can grab that Isley, the bio, so they don’t cook my fucked-up, whacked-out brother.*

Slaughter was glad Apache Dan was there because next to Neb, he was his best friend in the world. The feds had dropped him thirty years on a RICO conviction six years before. Nobody was happier to be out than him. Moondog was the sergeant-at-arms, warlord of the Pittsburgh chapter. He’d been the guy that walked around with a baseball bat at club meetings and rapped guys in the head if they got out of hand or spoke out of turn. He was absolutely brutal and fearless and the very man that could plan and stage a raid into the guts of the Red Hand. He’d been doing ten years at USP Atlanta for arms trafficking. Shanks and Irish were from the Youngstown chapter and were good boys. They’d been whacking guys for the Youngstown Italian mob and were doing life at Lewisburg on murder conspiracy convictions. Fish was out of Baltimore. And Jumbo—all 350 pounds of him—was from Pittsburgh. Fish had been sitting on a twenty-five year stretch for narcotics distribution and Jumbo on fifteen years for extortion, hijacking, and racketeering.

Once everyone had a good shine going, Slaughter stood up and laid it all out for them. What was at stake, what they had to do, and how slim their chances of survival were.

“Nobody’s forced into this shit, man,” he told them. “This is really my beef, my brother, my life. Any of you boys want out you just say so and nobody thinks less of you.”

“You heard the man,” Moondog said.

“Shit,” Shanks said.

“Fuck that noise,” Fish said. “I’d rather die out here than rot inside.”

“Ain’t that for sure,” Irish told him. “I gotta eat that creamed beef on toast in Lewisburg one more fucking time and I take my own life.”

A few laughs at that.

“Shit,” Fish said. “You oughta try the green bean casserole at Rahway. Motherfucker, it’ll shrivel your balls.”

“Bullshit,” Shanks said.

Jumbo said, “John, this is a get-out-of-jail-free card for us all. And there ain’t a man here you haven’t helped and you haven’t gone to the mat for. We’d all rather die at your side, high and free, than be picking nits at the graybar hotel.”

“Yeah, that’s the shit plain and clear,” Apache Dan said. “We’re Disciples so let’s get it on, baby.”

So that pretty much took care of that.

Slaughter figured he had to throw that out there just to be fair on things. Even though he was in charge as the club president of Pittsburgh and nobody disputed the fact, the Disciple Nation had always been a democracy and every patch had his say, every member voted. But Slaughter knew they wouldn’t let him down. It was inconceivable for the men they were. Once you were patched-in to a club like the Disciples, the club and its members always came first. First before wives, girlfriends, family, jobs and your own well-being. First before even God. That’s the kind of connection there was. It wasn’t easy to earn the three-piece patch of the Devil’s Disciples, prospecting for them could be three shades of hell, but once you were part of it, once you were patched-in, you were part of something bigger than yourself and you took care of that and it took care of you.

“All right then,” Slaughter said. “We all agree. So I call a war council and we plan this shit out.”

Once war council was called, everyone yielded to Moondog, the war lord, even the president, because Moondog was the guy who was responsible for the safety of the club, the security of its members, and carrying out raids and retribution against enemies of the Disciples. Moondog, whose real name was Mike Spector, was cut from the same cloth as Slaughter himself: both were ex-Marines. But whereas Slaughter had seen some action in Iraq with the 15th Marine Expeditionary, before he was sent stateside and spent most of his enlistment in the brig, Moondog had been a member of an elite Scout/Sniper platoon and a demolitions expert. There wasn’t much about weapons or explosives, night-fighting or surveillance that he did not know.

So when Moondog spoke, even the baddest boys of the club listened and listened good.

“While you girls been having your hen party, I been scratching down some items we’re gonna need. First off, we all need bikes. Second, we need

guns and I'd like some C-4 and det cord just in case. Grenades would be nice. White phosphorus…"

His list was long and detailed.

His strategy, based on Brightman's map of the NORAD fortress, was sketchy. The fortress was surrounded by a high chainlink fence. That would have to be breeched. There were six doors leading into the structure itself. One or more would have to be blown. Other than possibly the use of several diversions to draw the rats from their den, he had no solid plans and wouldn't, he said, until he scoped out the place and knew the numbers of the Red Hand, their weapons, what kind of security they were running. Most of the Ratbags at the fortress were ex-military. They were commanded by Colonel Krigg himself, the leader of the Red Hand. Chances were, things would be tight.

"All I can tell you right now is that it's gonna be fucking hairy," he said. "That and the fact that I want explosives. Lots of C-4."

This whole ride into Indian country was going to be one for the books, one to go down in the annals of the Disciple Nation, one to remember.

If any of them survived it, that was.

Chapter Eleven

Three days later, they were ready.

Although Brightman was an asshole and the bikers had absolutely zero respect for guys like him, they had to give him one thing: he got things done. Everything they wanted, they got. If it wasn't on base, and most of the things they asked for weren't, Brightman had it flown in—weapons, gear, *and* motorcycles. Slaughter's hardtail was ready and waiting for him, but the other six had no scoots. Brightman had fixed that. A variety of bikes were flown in ("liberated" from the Outlaws clubhouse in Milwaukee, apparently). Apache Dan found himself a chromed-out FXR that he fell in love with, Shanks and Fish both chose black ice Screaming Eagle Road Kings, Jumbo grabbed a custom '54 Panhead, and once Irish sat in the saddle of a sweet green flame Softail lowrider, you couldn't get him off it. It was a serious improvement over the variety of ugly, patchwork, Frankensteinian ratbikes he'd thrown together over the years.

There was one bike that nobody touched because they knew it would be Moondog's: a Boss Hoss 375 Horse with a deadly 100-HP nitrous boost. It was ceramic black with a red spider on the gas tank, a road monster with so much meat that nobody but Moondog wanted to tangle with that lady.

"That's her," he said when he saw it. "That's the Widow."

Brightman also got them an olive drab school bus to stow their supplies, bikes, extra fuel, and to take cover when needed. It was customized with a fold-down ramp in the back to run their bikes up, bunks for the boys, and a radio with which Slaughter would contact Brightman when he made the grab of the bio. Anytime a club went on a road ride for any distance, they brought along a chase vehicle like the bus. But under Moondog's precise instructions it was more than a chase vehicle, it was a War Wagon riveted with ¾" steel plating cut with narrow gunports and impact-resistant black one-way plexiglass for the windshield. Neither the steel plating nor the

plexiglass would stop a heavy round like a .50 caliber, but would give them protection against 9mm and the like. He also had a V-shaped cow-catcher made out of scrap metal and rebar welded to the front end.

“It’ll come in handy,” he said, “in case we have to plow through wrecks or anything.”

Once the bikes were dialed in, they leathered up, got into formation and Moondog said, “Keep the dirty side down and watch your asses.”

Then they throttled up, hungry for pavement.

The Army base was roughly an hour from the Minnesota border, so within sixty minutes, the Disciples crossed into the land of the buffalo…and the undead.

They rode into the wind, high and tight, Slaughter out front as chapter president with Apache Dan at his side as road captain. Next came Shanks and Irish and Jumbo. Moondog was the sweep, the backdoor. As warlord and probably the best rider outside of Slaughter himself, he needed a clear view of the entire column so he could see any trouble long before it happened. Fish trailed in the War Wagon. They all carried walkie-talkies so they could remain in contact with the Wagon.

The pack took the road on their iron horses mile by mile with a collective thunder of six purring hogs and other than a few wrecks, there was nothing to get in their way. Not like the old days when you had citizens in their General Motors cages clogging up all that free space. Slaughter only wished it *was* the old days when they took to the road with thirty or forty bikes and made a deafening roar, an army of hardriders, invincible, hell-bent and horny, looking for a fight, a rumble, a bare knuckle contest to keep their edge, pussy and booze, fast times and stoned nights.

Those were the days.

But even with some of that maudlin bullshit softening his brain, nothing could take away how he felt to be riding with his brothers and nothing could take from them the thrill, the charge, the brotherhood of being together and not just for a road ride or a field event, some three-day orgy of booze and broads and blood, but a mission, a barbarian campaign. Nothing got their hearts pounding and the red stuff in their veins burning hotter then the idea of an engagement, and this little party was going to be the end-all.

You’re going to lose these boys and you know it, Slaughter thought to himself as the wind blew into his face and his mirrored sunglasses showed him a world that was plucked and pitted like an old rack of bones. *Either all*

of them or most of them. You'll lose them or they'll lose you. No way you're getting out of this pissing contest intact. It's gonna be dark. It's gonna be ugly.

"And it's gonna be the best time these machineheads have had in many years," he said under his breath.

So like a knife drawn from gut to sternum, they cut north through the desolation of Minnesota, jumping off the I and onto 10 which would take them northwest across the state line and to Fargo, and into the darkest bowels of the Dakotas where the shit would get deep and dangerous. In St. Cloud, which looked to Slaughter like the set from some post-apocalyptic movie with its shattered buildings, burned-out neighborhoods, and skeletons sitting in cars, they crossed the Mississippi and it looked pretty much the same on the other bank, not a single WELCOME TO THE DEADLANDS sign to be had. Though, interestingly, someone had taken some articulated skeletons and withered brown cadavers that were *almost* skeletons and rigged them up on crossbars like scarecrows. There were several dozen of them. Along with a few crudely-painted skull-and-crossbone signs, this was the warning to the curious.

The only warning there would be.

As they passed out of St. Cloud they saw the dead wandering about through the ruins. Some of them stood around as the pack went by, more curious than anything.

About ten miles outside of the city they came upon a roadhouse with the amusing title of 'The Royal Head'. Parked outside were about a dozen bikes, most of them rusty and spattered with mud. Slaughter got on the box and told Fish to pull over at the bend in the road.

"Could be Cannibal Corpse," he told Moondog, who agreed. "Let's go kick ass or get our asses kicked. A good dust-up will get the boys feeling like men again."

"Sure as shit."

There weren't too many questions as Moondog passed out the pistol-gripped sawed-off 12-gauge pumps. They took the weapons happily.

"We go in quiet," Moondog informed them, clipping a pair of white phosphorus grenades to his leather club vest. "Then we kill anything we find."

The Disciples grinned.

“I’m smelling me some shiteaters,” Fish said, which was one of the many derogatory names the Disciples had for members of Cannibal Corpse.

“Let’s light this shit up then,” Apache Dan said.

Slaughter led the way through the stunted trees and across the gravel lot, his boys spread out behind him like commandos. There was absolutely no activity in or around the joint, just that hazy blue sky with the sun burning down like a hot yellow coin.

Slaughter motioned for the others to hang back as he went up to the door and tried it. It was open. He gave the Disciples the signal and they crept forward, tensing with anticipation to a man.

“We come across Coffin or Reptile, remember: those pricks are mine and mine alone,” he whispered to the others and they understood perfectly. It would have been a boon if any of them bagged Reptile or Coffin, but Slaughter wanted those two just a little bit more. The way he looked at it, the three Disciples they wasted had been done so on his watch.

He opened the door a crack and listened for activity.

There was nothing.

Either the place was empty, there was an ambush waiting, or the Disciples had caught the owners of those bikes with their pants down. He opened it a bit more and a gassy stink of putrefaction came out. Nothing new there, but it gave him ideas.

“All right,” he told Moondog. “Follow me in.”

Moondog gave him a look that plainly said he didn’t like it, that they didn’t know what they were stepping in here. That he, as warlord and sergeant-at-arms, advised a little reconnoitering first—there could be fifty wormboys out back for all they knew.

But Slaughter shook his head. The look in his eyes said all the warlord needed to know: *These boys have been in-stir too long, man, they need to learn how to fight as one again, as a club.*

“Let’s go,” Slaughter told him.

* * *

Even with their boots on they were quiet as they moved through the barroom, stepping quietly on the plank floors. Inside, it was a mess… wreckage and trash scattered everywhere. And bones. They were strewn about, heaped in the corners. Human bones that were gnawed and scraped,

smashed and broken open for their marrow. The stink of death was strong, but it didn't come from the remains. Instead, it emanated from the forms lying about like it was siesta time: six dead ones sprawled on the bar top, on the floor, under tables.

And as Slaughter looked at them—faces like seamed leather masks missing eyes and noses, lips shriveled back to reveal jutting teeth—he had to wonder, and not for the first time, if they went dormant like this because *they* needed to or if it was the worms that needed some down time. No matter. A few were face-down and they wore the colors of Cannibal Corpse.

"Shiteaters, alright," Jumbo said.

"Do 'em," Slaughter said.

Under Moondog's direction it was carried out calmly, efficiently, and slowly. They each chose a wormboy and put the barrels of their shotguns to the heads of the zombies. It was unbelievably simple and that's why Slaughter knew it was going to go to shit, and right about the time the Disciples pulled their respective triggers and sent the deadheads back to hell, it hit the fan.

The door behind the bar flew open and at least ten wormboys came charging out. And what a sight they were. Their faces were raging liquiform epidemics of leprous rot…mucid, dripping, fluids oozing from ulcerous sores. Eyes like rotten eggs spilling tears of slime, mouths filled with undulant worm follicles. They came shambling and stumbling, creeping forth to engulf the intruders.

Slaughter was expecting it.

When they came out, he brought up his 12-gauge pump and took out the first Cannibal Corpse with close-range scattershot that blew the zombie's head apart into a kaleidoscopic eruption of pink, red, black, and gray ribbons that splashed against the others and sprayed the walls in a dripping meat Rorschach blot.

The other Cannibals went right over the top of the flopping husk and Slaughter didn't have to tell his boys to wade in.

Moondog reacted first.

As one of the wormboys reached for him, he smashed the barrel of his shotgun into its head and kicked it swiftly in the sternum, knocking it aside and giving him the time to blow the face off another pitted skull and get a glancing shot into the advancing horde before three of them crested over him like a rogue wave and he went down fighting with them.

Slaughter ran at them firing and working the pump on his gun.

Apache Dan and Shanks both got off a couple rounds but a really big Cannibal—a real wagonload of crawling carrion—got hold of Irish and lifted him up like he was stuffed with pillow down and threw him at the wall ten feet away. And maybe *threw* is not nearly descriptive enough, because Irish was fucking launched like cannonshot, going right over the top of the bar and crashing into a Budweiser mirror and coming down in an explosion of glass as his descent upset about a dozen dusty bottles of hootch.

Jumbo, who was about the size of an Abrams tank, grabbed a downed and quite overanxious Cannibal Corpse with a face like a ball of suet by the ankles and proceeded to use him as a bat, swinging him from side to side and sweeping wormboys out of his path so he could get to Irish before the zombies could. When he cleared the way, he swung around again and again like a man throwing a discus and let fly his wormboy right through the window, taking out the neon Leinenkugel's sign in the process.

Not wanting to fire buckshot with the Disciples so close at hand, Slaughter used the pistol grip of his weapon like a club, battering it into the face of a Cannibal until he went down, then ducking just in time as another deadhead swung a femur at his head. Slaughter moved in and hammered the zombie in the ribs with his left fist until he felt something give in there. Then he darted back, pulled the *Kukri* from its sheath and started slashing and hacking like a man felling sugarcane. He took off arms, a head, opened two bellies, then brought the blade down overhead, bisecting a Cannibal's head from cranium to chin like a fork of white-hot lightning splitting a dead oak.

By then Moondog was on his feet and he and another Cannibal Corpse were facing each other, both sprayed with gore and decay, swinging, hitting and getting hit, and it was an old-style bare-fisted punch-up as they kept hammering each other. After they both took six or seven good shots each, Moondog jumped up and brought the cleats of his boot down on the wormboy's knee and there was a wet snap clear as a pistol shot. The wormboy screamed out in rage and Moondog took him by his greasy hair and slid the blade of his black anodized K-Bar fighting knife under his ear and into his brainpan. The wormboy went over dead as a stump. It was an old Marine Raider quick-kill technique from World War II and it still did the job just fine.

While Moondog was so engaged and Jumbo fought viciously to keep the zombies from lunching on the downed Irish, and Shanks tangled with a pair of Cannibals, both Slaughter and Apache grabbed up shotguns from the floor and walked around, dropping the dead men until their guns were empty.

Then there was silence.

The air was thick with burnt cordite, gunsmoke, and the mist of rot that rose from the dead at the feet of the Disciples.

Irish rose up from behind the bar like a ghost, shards of glass falling from him. He had a bottle of Jack Daniels Old No. 7 by the neck. Eyes rolling, face gashed and bleeding, he said, “Rock and roll, my brothers.” And promptly went down again.

Jumbo scooped him up and Moondog led them out into the fresh air.

Slaughter and Apache Dan remained behind, stepping around over a carpet of tissue, blood, maggots, and seeking worms.

“That was the shit,” Slaughter said.

“We’re lucky we pulled that one off,” Apache Dan said, squeezing blood from his long black ponytail. “Had to be twenty of those muthas, John. We better not go diving into a scene like that again or we’re going to come up short.”

“You’re right,” Slaughter told him, “and I knew it going in there. So did Moondog. But these boys needed some seasoning and there’s only one way to get that, brother.”

“I’m just advising caution. This shit is for keeps.”

Slaughter clapped him on the shoulder and led him outside where Shanks had just taken the head off the Cannibal Corpse that Jumbo threw out the window. He tossed the head into the gravel lot where it rolled. “Sheeeeeeit,” he said.

The others were smoking and laughing, enjoying the buzz of the after-action, with the exception of Moondog, who was off securing the perimeter as he always did. They were bloody and dirty, cut and bruised. And as far as Slaughter was concerned, they were ready now.

Fish was telling a story, and as usual it involved sex.

“…so we’re drinking at this bar up north in the boonies, checking out this three-day festival in Eerie, Penn. All the old bands are up there—Molly Hatchet, Foghat, even Mountain.” Fish went on, “Must’ve been…what? Fifteen years ago. Yeah, at least. So I’m up there with Charley Sweet and

Creep—God rest their souls, man—and we're at this bar getting pissed, just juiced and sloppy, right? Creep…oh, old Creep…never had any respect for his dick. He got his eye on this Indian bitch hanging around the bar. Don't look like much to me—real dark, long hair, kinda chunky. Doesn't do shit for me, that one.

"But Creep? Hell, he's in love. You remember Creep, motherfucker always had an eye for the ladies. If they had a hole at the bottom, they were his type. So pretty soon him and this squaw are hitting it off. Charlie and me just shrug, right? Whatever gives him wood, that's his business. Maybe an hour before last call, Creep and his Squaw, both pissed to the gills, disappear. Next day—it's not even noon—Creep's at the bar throwing back hooks of Wild Turkey, just staring off into space. He keeps shivering all the time, you know, like something's crawling on his skin. 'You nail that stuff?' Charlie asks him. Creep just nods. 'Any good?' Charlie asks. Creep, he turns to us…and that look on his face! Shit! Like maybe he'd just eaten a turd sandwich. That bad. 'Yeah,' Creep says, 'we were all over each other last night. Did it in the dark. Fucked like hogs, we did. I wake up this morning next to her and that's when I realize this pig ain't even an Indian.' Charlie looks at me. We both look at Creep. 'Not an Indian? She was dark like one,' I say. 'Sure she was,' Creep says. 'Except I wake up this morning and I see her in the light. I mean, I *really* see her in the light. That's when I see she ain't no fucking Indian, man, just a filthy white woman, dirty black. In fact, only clean spots on her were her tits, twat, and lips.' Creep, he excused himself then. Had to go puke again, you see."

"Bullshit," Shanks said while the others laughed.

"Happened just the way I said it," Fish told them, laughing. "Some time, I'll tell you about that hooker with the three tits."

Jumbo was holding up Irish, who was coming around pretty good by then. "I'm okay, my brother, I'm okay. I was just getting warmed up in there. Just getting my sea legs," he said, taking two steps and going down again. Jumbo scooped him up like his bride. Irish stroked his bald head. "You're beautiful, man."

"Put him in the Wagon," Moondog told Jumbo.

They went back to the War Wagon and their bikes and nobody even mentioned cutting the patches off the Cannibal Corpse members. When they got Irish in the Wagon along with his bike, and after Jumbo had attended to their wounds and his own, Apache Dan, as road captain, told

Shanks he was chase, which gave Fish a little time to get out in the wind on his scoot.

“Shit,” Shanks said.

“We’re going to each take our turn on chase,” Slaughter said so everyone could hear it.

Once they had the Wagon secured, they kicked their bikes over and formed up. “Let’s do it,” Slaughter said and off they went, into the wind, into the day, cutting deeper into the Deadlands to whatever came next.

Chapter Twelve

Thick as summer locusts, the dead moved up the road in an enraged swarm. Blown by desert-hot winds, they shambled forward en masse in clouds of dust to meet the invaders, pushing ever closer with a yellow, subterranean stink of mortuary spices. It was Slaughter who saw them at a distance with his Minox binoculars. Men, women, and children, erupting in an army from the city limits of Copton, Minnesota like a flurry of hollow-eyed wraiths breaking out of a midnight cemetery. He got the bikes and their riders into the Wagon.

Since there was no way around, they were going right through.

“We’ll slice ourselves a path right through with our cow-catcher,” Moondog said. “Gonna be ugly, but it’s the only way.”

The closer they got, the thicker the swarm was until they could see hundreds of them, chalk-white funeral sculptures bearing the stigmata of the grave, stalking out like bone-pale mantises stuffed with dry grasses and withered weeds, semi-human ghouls on the march.

All of the Disciples were gathered up front as Moondog pushed the Wagon further, gathering up speed, but not too much, knowing he had to have enough velocity to punch through the horde.

Slaughter waited, tensed like the others.

He’d never seen so many undead in one place before and he would have been lying if he did not admit to himself that he was scared, really scared. Even the wormboys that attacked Rice’s farmhouse had been a drop in a bucket compared to this. And what really bothered him was that it seemed almost as if they knew the War Wagon and its outriders were coming. That was crazy but he did not honestly think the idea sounded as crazy as it should have under less trying circumstances.

It’s like they’re waiting for us, he thought then. *Like every walking stiff in the county is gathered there in Copton, waiting for us. Like they were*

compelled to wait for us.

He'd had the same feeling at Rice's farmhouse. It had seemed downright odd that the zombies had come down the road and chose Rice's place to attack. It seemed somehow coordinated and he did not like that.

By the time they got the bikes into the Wagon, a storm began to break over Copton. The sky became a boiling black mass stitched with white seams of lightning, and the land grew dark with shadows. Within ten minutes as that darkness fell and those cloud masses overhead unzipped themselves with hot arcing fingers of electricity, the thunder began to boom so loud it made the windshield of the Wagon tremble in its frame.

Then it really started to hit.

Forking lightning was drawn down to the rooftops and steeples of Copton, the thunder exploding like cluster bombs as a clammy dank ground mist blew through the legs of the zombies.

Then the rain crashed down, except it wasn't droplets of water, but a rain of red worms falling from high above. They thudded against the bus like soft, rotten hailstones, smashing against the windshield and leaving smears of pulpy red tissue that soon built up into a soggy, runny membrane that the wipers could barely clear. They pelted the zombies and carpeted the road in twitching masses, gathering in undulant red pools that burst their banks and flooded the world until it seemed they were four or five inches deep on the road The sound of the Wagon's wheels cutting through that was sickening to the extreme…like riding through especially wet, congested leaves.

"Jesus Christ," Fish said. "I'm about to lose my mind here."

Jumbo said, "Hang on, Fish. It won't last long."

As the wipers worked frantically and the wiper fluid gushed to clear the glass, Slaughter could see that the zombies were sill coming, feverish with worms, but still coming right at them and impact would be in less than a minute.

"Here we go," he said. "Grab something and hang tight."

"And that don't mean my dick, Shanks," Irish said, his voice high and broken as he tried to calm his own nerves.

Shanks just said, "Shit."

The worms came down in an ever-thickening rain until the Wagon was painted with a slimy, cold wormjelly that oozed in clots and clumps like the aspic gelatin of a canned ham.

The electrical storm did not abate in the least.

It raged and flashed as forks of lightning came burning down from the heavens, hitting trees and houses and aerials in Copton and fires blazed in every quarter. Slaughter saw a steeple in the distance get hit by branching lightning and there was a blinding flash and then the church and houses to either side went up like kindling, throwing out smoke and flames in sheets. About ten seconds before the Wagon hit the zombies, something in the town detonated with a rolling, sonic boom and three gigantic clouds of fire rose above the roofline.

It must have been a tanker truck filled with gasoline or a storage tank of natural gas, he figured, because it ignited like napalm, creating a wild, raging firestorm that swept through the town, scattering red-hot ashes into the dry wind.

Moondog had the War Wagon up to about forty miles-per-hour then as it reached the outskirts of the town. Every time the wipers cleared the worm goo away, they could all see just what sort of inferno they were driving into, the zombies backlit now by the spreading fires in the gray afternoon dimness.

Then they hit the zombies.

The worms were bad enough, but the zombies were worse.

The cow-catcher did the real work and the wormboys and wormgirls out there literally exploded as it breached their lines like a hot knife. The zombies went up like blood-blown bags of meat, gore and guts raining up and over the Wagon, a few stray limbs bouncing across the hood. The bus shook with each jarring impact. *THUD, THUD, THUD, THUD-THUD-THUD!* Moondog could barely see where he was driving and the Wagon shook and reeled as it smashed zombies aside and split them in two, rolling right over them, knocking aside wrecked cars and trucks and slicing deep into the bowels of Copton which was a furnace by that point, a great smoldering kiln, and the air inside the bus became thin, rarified, dry and hard to breathe.

But the zombies were still coming.

That was the amazing thing, the disturbing thing: they just kept coming and coming in waves, crowding the streets and pressing closer and closer until the bus crashed into them and their anatomies splashed over the pavement and drenched the others.

As Copton continued to burn, great bonfires swept up by the dry winds became a living fire demon, a sentient conflagration of pure elemental,

oxidizing wrath and the zombies went up like tinder and blazed like sulfur. They were melting corpse candles and hot smoldering fuses and Guy Fawkes dummies glowing with tongues of flame, chestnuts popping in firepits. They did not run or try to flee. They were engulfed and still they shrieked with scalded voices for the flesh of the invaders as the fire withered them and scattered them like crematory ashes in a whirling, scorching wind.

Sweat beading his face, his throat scratchy and dry, Slaughter held onto the dashboard as Moondog held onto the wheel and pushed them down narrow streets and arteries clogged with debris and blackened stick-forms.

In was a yellow-orange jungle out there and its trees and vines and creepers were made of fire. Copton was overgrown by the combustion, flooded, drowning in searing brimstone growths, black smoke rolling through the streets and sparks sweeping down byways. The houses and buildings were red glowing bricks. And the zombies…fire ghosts, feral red things reaching out with gnarled fingers, breathing embers, and flaking away like coals in the sizzling, crackling purgatory, the steam and smoke boiler of the holocaust.

“Hey! Did you fucking see that?” Moondog asked.

Slaughter looked at him.

Moondog just shook his head. “I’m losing it. I saw…I thought I saw…”

“What?”

“I don’t know…a guy standing there in the flames. Just standing there, only he wasn’t burning. Weird. Like an old-time preacher,” Moondog said. “Long black coat…and a black hat.”

Slaughter sat down because his knees felt weak. Well, then, now somebody besides himself had seen Black Hat. He tried to convince himself that it wasn’t so, but he didn’t believe it for a moment.

Maybe what you need to do is quit trying to rationalize shit. Quit trying to make sense of things. Take ‘em as they come.

Which was fine and dandy, only it didn’t explain a thing and he badly needed some explanations. Black Hat was occupying a zone of darkness in his head that was widening its perimeters by the hour and Slaughter was beginning to worry that he’d fall in and never find his way out again. There was both rhyme and reason to all this, only it was beyond his limited faculties of comprehension to understand. But it was big. It was important. Black Hat was prophecy and fate, doom and destiny, twisted divination and

mad-dog Karmic retribution all rolled into one and Slaughter felt that right into his marrow.

That Black Hat was evil was absolute.

That they would meet was inevitable.

And that they would clash was predestined.

This was all Slaughter really knew for sure. *Some dark night on some dark lick of pavement, we're going to come together. And before the pain and the dying and the bloodshed, there just might be a few answers.*

Moondog eased the War Wagon out of Copton and the town faded into thankful memory. Then they were on the road and the temperature dropped and the Disciples began to breathe again. Behind them, the horizon glowed red.

The storm still raged but the worms had been replaced by sweeping sheets of rain, real rain that washed the worm and zombie remains from the Wagon and brought a welcoming chill to the air, cleaning away the stink of death and cremation that was the special smell of Copton, Minnesota.

"Sheeee-iiit," Shanks said, and everyone agreed silently, for what else was there to say?

Chapter Thirteen

By nightfall, they were on their bikes again, punching through northwest Minnesota, skirting the outer edge of North Dakota. They saw very little after the madhouse of Copton, just lots of little towns with the dead wandering the streets. But no armies; just stragglers. Slaughter led them straight through every town, only stopping for a bite to eat or a fluid exchange, emptying bladders and filling gas tanks in wide open, uninhabited country.

Around sundown, in Clay County, the forest to either side of the road became thick and impenetrable, cut by an occasional river or creek, the ragged finger of a dirt road. Nothing but woods and tree-covered hills frosted by moonlight. No cabins. Not even so much as a boarded-up roadside stand.

The road forked to the left, then the right, snaked over a series of low hills, tall pines rising above looking like they might fall at any moment. And then a valley opened up before them, the road sliding down into its belly. Slaughter was keeping a close watch on just about everything, as he knew the others were, too. He was expecting an ambush at just about every turn. Then the pack was heading down into that sullen valley, a patch of boiling mist rising to greet them. They were in it before they could even think of slowing down or stopping altogether. It was a thick and roiling mist like the sort that would blow in from the sea, gray and gauzy, rolling through the hi-beams like smoke. Suddenly, visibility was down to less than twenty feet and they all downshifted, riding the clutch, cutting their speed to a safe level, navigating the crazy twists and turns the road threw at them.

Apache Dan, as road captain, gave the signal and they all rolled to a stop. He and Slaughter checked the maps Brightman had given them by penlight.

“I don’t like this fog, John. Too easy to stack a bike out in that,” Apache explained. “All it would take is a log lying in the road, a wrecked car. Anything.”

“Yeah. We better pile into the Wagon.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

They lowered the ramp and rolled the bikes up into the War Wagon and got inside themselves. Moondog took the wheel again and Shanks sat in the back with Jumbo and Irish, listening to more of Fish’s randy tales of life on the road, which left Slaughter and Apache Dan up front with Moondog.

With the arrival of the fog, things began to change.

The air no longer smelled chill and clean, but dank and moist and almost noisome, like swamp gas blown off a rotting bog. And it was warm. Hot almost. Sweat trickled down Slaughter’s neck and beaded his forehead. Moondog had to turn the wipers on to cut through the moisture clinging to the windshield.

It just wasn’t natural.

That’s what Slaughter was thinking and wondering why he was surprised by any of it. *What did you expect out here? The Outbreak was a lot worse out here, man. Shit, they used nukes in Denver and Oklahoma City, half a dozen other places. You don’t let off a charge of radiation like that within the same twenty-four hour period and not have consequences.*

But maybe he’d hoped they’d avoid things like that.

Maybe that was hoping too much.

The wormboys and Cannibal Corpse was one thing, as were the ragtag militias and the Red Hand. Those were known. It was the unknown things that worried him, those crazy nameless things you heard about from time to time: the mutations, the crawling nightmare abominations spawned by the release of atomic radiation. He wasn’t about to let his imagination carry him away into realms of darkness, yet he was not closing his mind to the things that might be out there, things he hoped he’d never have to look upon.

“Like fucking soup,” Apache Dan said. “Getting thicker.”

Moondog nodded. “Sure as shit.”

Slaughter sighed, lighting a cigarette. He could hear Fish in the back going on and on, telling one whopper after another. The boys were laughing nervously and Slaughter would have bet right then that the fog was getting to them, too. The night. The fog. The unknown.

“No, she was a beauty, this one,” Fish was saying, “tall and blonde. A Swede. Naomi Ericksen was her name. Don’t that just give you a hard on? *Naomi Erickson.* Her old man had bucks. Shit, I could’ve had the easy life with her. Too good for a fucking road rat like me. But she thought I was exciting. I took her to a couple club events and I’m not sure if she was turned on by it all or sick to her stomach. Maybe both. Then I made a big mistake…”

Slaughter watched the road.

The fog was thick and stayed thick. The headlights of the Wagon bounced right off it, reflecting back at them, and Moondog kept the speed down to less than thirty miles an hour because there was no way in hell to know what was out there with visibility down under twenty feet. The trees were black and thick-boled, their limbs hanging out over the road like the tentacles of giant squid. They passed a long-abandoned service station and the mist turned the pumps into stalking, mechanistic things like the Daleks on *Dr. Who*.

“Looks like it’s getting thinner,” Apache Dan said.

Slaughter thought so, too.

“We’re coming up a hill,” Moondog said.

It was a low, gradual grade, but it kept moving upward and that was the good thing because Slaughter was all for getting out of that goddamn valley. But then the hill crested and they started down again. Just before the fog began to thicken like pale gelatin, the hi-beams of the Wagon swept over a lonely meadow at the side of the road and what they saw—just for that briefest of moments—was something unbelievable.

“Holy shit,” Apache said.

That summed it up. The meadow was lit by the moonlight and they saw great ramparts and heaps of white, shining things: bones. Not human bones, of course, but the bones of animals lying about in a great crazy ossuary architecture of rib slats and skulls and disarticulated skeletons. They only saw it for a moment before the night swallowed it and the fog came pushing in again, but it was burned into their brains.

“Buffalo, I bet,” Moondog said.

Slaughter nodded. “Could be.”

“Maybe they all starved,” Apache Dan put in, but the idea, of course, was ludicrous with all the heavy grasses growing wild to either side of the road.

“Maybe,” Slaughter said.

But he wasn’t buying it and he knew they weren’t either. It didn’t look like those animals had lain down and died, it looked like their bones had been dumped there in a litter pile.

“…well,” Fish went on in the back, “I made my biggest mistake when I turned Naomi onto crank. I mean, who am I kidding? I cooked the shit. I sold it. I made serious scratch off it. But one thing you don’t do is turn on anyone you care about to that shit. I never used. Well, Naomi found her drug of choice and she became a first class fucking methamphibian. Fucking crazy, wild, eyes glazed over, hair falling out, sores on her face… ah, she ended up in dry out and her old man threatened to kill me. So that’s how I fucked up my sweet thing. Man, before the Outbreak, I could have had the life, but you know what?”

“You’re fucking stupid?” Irish said.

“That’s it, man. That’s it.”

Fish started laughing then and nobody seemed to get it until he jumped and shook his ass in Jumbo’s face and started dancing around, humming the tune to “If I Only Had a Brain” from *The Wizard of Oz.* Jumbo and Irish were laughing by then, too, and Shanks was just shaking his head as he often did with Fish. Since Fish had an audience, he danced around like the scarecrow from the movie, singing:

“I could while away the hours, smokin’ up them flowers,
If I only had a brain.
With Naomi I’d be busy copulatin’,
I could swear off masturbatin’,
If I only had a brain…”

They all burst out laughing at that, even Shanks who generally did not find anything humorous in life. They started really carrying on then but Slaughter wasn’t in the mood for that locker room shit so he told them to cool it.

“Hey, we’re just fucking around, John,” Jumbo said.

And Slaughter was going to tell them that now wasn’t the time and maybe they’d better get their shit together because they were playing for keeps here, but then he started seeing the vehicles. Moondog slowed the Wagon down. There were pick-up trucks, military Hummers, all of them

smashed up like they'd been picked up by a giant and dropped. They were scattered over the road, in and out of the ditch. Slaughter thought he saw some skeletons in the cab of a pick-up truck, but he couldn't be sure. As they passed a Hummer with an open top, moving around it slowly, he saw a camouflage fatigue shirt dark with blood stains draped over the driver's side door—no body to go with it, just the shirt, and that made it somehow worse: like the owner had been sucked out of his clothes.

"Red Hand?" Apache said.

"Gotta be," Moondog told him. "I wonder what happened?"

He moved the Wagon slowly through the maze of wrecked vehicles and every time they thought they were free of them, more were revealed in the fog like grim headstones. All had flat tires or torn off bumpers, crushed-in quarter panels or doors missing. Something absolutely devastating had happened here. Slaughter told himself it could have been a battle…but he didn't believe it. He saw no bullet holes, no burned vehicles, no sign of exchanged ordinance…just those smashed Hummers and trucks. Some of them had huge, gouging scrapes in their sides.

The Wagon moved on, the fog heavier now, misting and drifting about them like fine lace. More abandoned vehicles, badly used. And then…what looked to be dangling thin cables that were hanging everywhere. They were perfectly white and freakish. They came down from the trees and out of the mist overhead, dozens and dozens of them, some drawn taut where they were connected to Hummers but most hanging limp and fraying, many broken and dangling in the slight breeze like broken clothesline wires.

At first, Slaughter thought he was looking at power cables, but power cables weren't white and there wouldn't be this many. The farther they went, the more they saw. Like driving through a forest of spaghetti. No, these weren't power lines. There was only one thing they could be—

"Fucking webs," Moondog said. "Spider webs."

"That's bullshit," Apache Dan said.

"You think so?"

The others had moved up front now and were looking, feeling the flesh along their spines begin to crawl. Webs or not, there were so many strands of that white material now it became decidedly eerie. Vehicles and trees were festooned in great sheets of the stuff like gigantic cobwebs and blown cotton, spokes and threads, ropes and anchor lines and spreading white nets. It was everywhere. Combining with the pale mist, the webbing looked

ghostly and surreal. The Wagon pushed through, snapping strands as it went, pushing through spokes of the stuff and woven filigree. The vehicles they saw now did indeed have human skeletons in them.

This was a graveyard, a great webbed graveyard.

“Maybe we should go back,” Apache Dan said, trying to keep the fear out of his voice and doing a real poor job of it.

“I agree,” Jumbo said. “*Something* spun this. I don’t want to see what.”

“Nowhere to turn around,” Moondog informed him.

“Keep pushing through,” Slaughter told him.

The web kept getting thicker, so thick that the wrecked vehicles were swallowed in networks of white mesh. The road ahead was a sold mass of the stuff, an immense funnel web that covered the trees and road and was spun overhead.

Then Apache Dan said, *“What in the fuck is that?”*

Moondog slowed the bus but it didn’t seem like it could possibly slow enough because that thing that came hopping and scuttling out like some cyclopean blind insect was right in front of them. From where Slaughter was standing he couldn’t be sure what it was with the fog wrapped around it, only he thought it had maybe a dozen eyes that were perfectly liquid and perfectly golden. It had a huge bulbous body that was black-red and shiny, hairs standing out on it like the bristles of a hog. And then the Wagon hit it. The cow-catcher sheared right into the thing and it made a weird, wavering, mewling sort of sound that made everyone’s hair stand on end and some brown-black juice sprayed up over the windshield and the wipers pushed it around in dirty smears.

Nobody said anything.

They knew what it was.

Slaughter felt that he finally knew what it was like to be a fly caught in the web of a house spider as they pushed on, tearing through that intricate network of white gossamer. In the headlights the stuff was shiny, glistening with something that might have been the saliva of spiders. It was about that time that they began seeing things dangling in cocooned pockets—animals, men, lots of men—dangling by threads, shriveled husks sucked dry. Then the mummies were everywhere, hanging like executed men on gallows’ nooses, bumping into the windshield, thumping against the side of the Wagon, and then it wasn’t just the mummies but spiders…or things like spiders: huge, round, bloated bodies the size of basketballs, horribly

glistening black-red, hairless and shiny, fans of needle-like legs sprouting from them. And eyes…glossy green eyes like marbles. Dozens of the things hung in clusters and leggy pods as if they were mating, daisy chains of mutant spiders whose jaws dripped a foul sap. There were hundreds of these clusters and literally thousands of individual spiders strung together in snotty harnesses of silk.

Slaughter thought they were like those photographs of social spider colonies in Texas you saw that webbed up forests…except taken to a fantastic extreme.

And then on the roof of the Wagon…*thump, thump, thump.*

Some of that was the mummies and some of it was the spider-clusters bouncing along the roof, but much of it was individual members dropping onto the War Wagon like it was something to be fed upon, something to be webbed and sipped dry. They could hear them up there scuttling about, perhaps dozens of them, their legs making a skin-crawling *ticka-ticka-ticka* sound as they raced back and forth over the metal shell.

These are the babies, Slaughter found himself thinking, as afraid as he'd ever been in his life. *These are the babies, but somewhere here, somewhere there's a mother…*

There were so many clusters of spiders by then that the Disciples began backing away into the rear of the Wagon. Slaughter and Apache Dan stayed up front with Moondog and, seeing no more wrecked vehicles, he eased the speed up to twenty and then thirty miles an hour and it became louder and louder with the clusters banging off the Wagon and the thumping of the hanging mummies. And then one of those clusters must have broken free of its anchor line and came swinging down at the windshield like a pendulum and the result was instantaneous: two or three of the spiders burst open upon impact with a gush of that brown-black slime and the worst part of it, the very worst part, was that everyone in the Wagon could hear the tinny, shrill, agonized screams of the things.

The windshield was a clotted, oozing mass of spider tissue and spider legs—some of which were still moving—that the wipers knocked from side to side until the spray cleaned the emulsion free.

And it was about this time that something came out of the mist and the webs at them. It was immense…something the size of a pick-up but swollen and shiny with spreading legs like telephone poles and a huge sucking black

mouth fanning out with immense fangs. It dropped right on the Wagon and the entire thing shook and groaned, rocking on its springs.

Several of the Disciples cried out.

Slaughter was one of them.

He could see a pair of night-black legs, immense but tapering to surgical points tapping away on the hood…and above, that huge and fleshy thing was tearing at the roof with its fangs and the sound of that was like the blades of shovels scraping iron. The force of those teeth was unbelievable, pushing in dents, and then it did something else, it suckered its mouth to the roof and tried to *drain* the Wagon. The roof popped out, then in, out, then in, like the shell of an aluminum can in a fist.

"Pour it on, man!" Slaughter cried at Moondog, who stomped the accelerator, and the War Wagon rocketed forward, still sluggish with its rider. And then the spider clusters were thinning and the web was no longer a funnel but threads and wires and ropes, and it was then that the Wagon rocked again with a resounding *thump* and the thing was gone, jumping back into the mists and webs as the Wagon climbed a hill and broke free from the valley below.

The Disciples let forth a collective sight.

And Fish said, "I think…I think I just pissed my pants."

Chapter Fourteen

About three hours later, they stopped for the night in a nice wide open field where there was not a lick of fog. The spiders were discussed and dispensed with. Nobody much wanted to dwell on any of that and the entire memory of those webbed bodies and clusters of spiders smashing against the windshield filled Slaughter's mouth with revulsion so he just shook it out of his head.

He lay on his bunk, smoking, trying to put the day and night in some kind of perspective that would make it all easier to live with. It was something he'd done countless other times after coming down from too much action, too much insanity, too much wild and randy bullshit.

What're you getting your back up about, Slaughter? he asked himself in a voice that was half-dream and half-awake. *You knew there'd be mutations out here. The spiders were just that. Disgusting, made your spine crawl and your belly flop over, but not truly unexpected. There'll be other things. Some of them not so bad and others a lot fucking worse.*

Sure, that was realistic, he knew, lying there in the dark of the Wagon, so close to his hog that he could smell the engine oil coming off her like a seductive sweet perfume.

But he knew that wasn't what was bothering him.

It was Black Hat.

The idea of that man…or *thing.*…disturbed him in ways he could not fathom. That somehow, some way, Black Hat was the axis upon which everything was spinning now. He told himself he couldn't possibly know that, yet he was certain of it.

The boys had settled in and even Fish had stopped talking about women, and the others drifted off, snoring and shifting in their sleep, Jumbo muttering things under his breath. Moondog was silent. He never made any noise when he slept and you could never be sure if he was sleeping or not.

Slaughter knew it was the sleep of a combat veteran, a guy who'd lived in a war zone. They always slept light like that. He was told he did it himself, and Moondog had seen a lot more action than he had. In a lot of ways, the war had never been over for him. He went from combat Marine to outlaw biker to convict at the federal Atlanta hellhole. In their own way, Slaughter knew, each was a combat duty station.

He pulled off his cigarette, trying to wind down, having trouble as he always did.

He closed his eyes and right away pictured a small, gangly-limbed boy in a blue confirmation suit that he knew was his kid brother Perry. *Red Eye.* It was funny, but whenever Slaughter thought of the kid he pictured him in that confirmation suit standing there in church, his eyes filled with the bright wonder of the Sacraments and the saints, the mystery of faith. To Slaughter himself it meant nothing. It was a racket. They wanted your money and that's all it was about: money and power. Even as a kid he knew that. Fuck the trappings and ritual. That was eye candy and soul food, a delightfully delirious drug for the brainwashed Catholic masses who were scared of life and terrified of death and haunted by their own sins and gnawing guilt. The marrow, the blood of it was money.

But not to Perry, not to old fucking Red Eye.

It all meant so much more to him and the shit the priests and sisters spewed out in school were absolute truths not to be questioned. Again, unlike Slaughter himself who as a kid was constantly in the shit for asking questions. *But, Father, if children are the lambs of God then why did he let all those kids die in concentration camps?* And the priest bearing down on him, whacking him with a ruler until his knuckles bled. *Because he loved them, you little bastard, because he loved them.* Ah, yes, the mystery of faith which was no mystery at all: just believe it, don't question it, accept your sedative, drink deep of your tonic of Roman propaganda and dig into your pockets and fill the collection plate.

Old Red Eye.

It was no wonder that he ended up as another little braindead devotee of the Legion of Terror. He'd wanted to belong to something all his life and the small bike clubs he'd hooked up with—imitating his big brother, no doubt—were too hedonistic and narcissistic for his liking. There was no underlying spiritual dogma, no divine godhead, no symbolic ceremony in 1%er clubs. They didn't celebrate the spirit, they unleashed the animal.

Maybe had Slaughter bought into some of that stuff he wouldn't be where he was today, and then again, maybe if Perry had rejected more of it, he wouldn't be where *he* was today: in a federal lock-up awaiting execution, the only thing standing between death and him, not God or Jesus or the Saints, but his rebellious hardcore brother who believed in nothing but the brotherhood of the road, the Devil's Disciples, and held up his middle finger to country, flag, and organized religion in general.

Man, all that belief and faith of yours, Red Eye. Look what it got you in the end. Me. One seriously fucked-up savior.

Yet, for all that and for his many malfunctions of character, Slaughter was going to pull it off. Even laying there, wired tight from the day, with his brothers sleeping around him, he knew he was going to pull it off somehow and that was probably because he *had* to pull it off.

But why am I thinking that if I do my problems are only just beginning?

Because he was dealing with the feds. Dealing with a bloated bureaucracy of parasites, rats, blood-suckers, and self-promoting career junkies. What Slaughter knew of them—the ATF, the DEA, the FBI, federal prosecutors, the judicial system itself that was rotten from the inside out—gave him little hope that they'd hold up their part of the bargain. These were spin doctors and perception managers, leeches in three-piece suits. They would fuck him (and Perry) as easily and casually as they fucked each other and the Constitution they were supposed to uphold.

Which is why you better get yourself some insurance, something that'll screw them as they screw you. Allow the fuck-ee to become the fuck-er.

Yeah, that's how you played the system.

Problem was, as always, they had the power.

Slaughter closed his eyes but sleep still would not come. His mind raced around through its memories, holding them, examining them, minutely examining the dirt stuck to them.

Before joining the Devil's Disciples when he was twenty, Slaughter had a history of violent crime behind him ranging from strong-arm robbery to obstruction of justice to arson. But he had never killed anyone. He had beaten guys, stabbed them, and once, as a member of a club called the Night Hawks, he had taken a meat cleaver to a pimp who did not pay his protection money in Youngstown. The guy had lived, minus three fingers, an ear, and a lot of blood.

What he was good at, he realized through the years, was intimidation. At 6’3 and 225 pounds, he was a rangy guy with broad shoulders, a barrel-chest, legs like pistons and a fearsome upper body strength acquired from playing football in high school and religiously doing 2,000 pushups a day and working the weights with a fanatic zeal, a habit practiced in-and-out of prison where he also worked the punching bag at least an hour every morning.

Back in the days of the Night Hawks his specialty was squeezing payments from drug dealers, businessmen, and street-level criminals. He was an enforcer and he enjoyed it. When he went after someone he was aggressive to the point of savagery. Fear was his tool and when his victims saw him coming, bristling with muscle, his beard shaggy and unkempt, his club vest greasy and dirty, his eyes filled with acid, they knew they were in for it and they were right. He usually came at them with a baseball bat or a tire iron, sometimes with his bare hands. After he seriously injured half a dozen people, word of mouth did the rest and his reputation grew, though now and again he still had to get rough, and that was what had bought him the first of three prison terms when he was twenty.

It also brought him to the attention of the Devil’s Disciples.

By the time he got out of Frackville he was hooked up pretty good with the club by doing time with several of their members. The Night Hawks had been brought down by the police for a variety of criminal endeavors, so Slaughter hung around the Disciples’ clubhouse in Youngtown. He caught the eye of a tough old biker named Sean Cady who put him up for membership and before long, Slaughter was a prospect. It was a hairy, scary sort of time when Cady tested him, as did the other members of the club. Cady started fights and made Slaughter finish them, sometimes with one guy, sometimes with two or three. He was asked to rob and steal, to torch houses and supply the club with drugs and hookers. One time he had to balance beer bottles on his head while the other members shot at them with .22 pistols. It was a test. All a test. Were you tough? Were you dependable? Were you loyal? Did you have guts?

That’s what it all came down to.

He proved himself, made patch, then murdered for the club when he was twenty-six by shotgunning a rival biker that had killed a Disciple and was immediately put up for the 158 Crew. Ironic thing about that was the biker

he did—a dumb violent fuck named Bobo—used to be his club brother in the Night Hawks. Shifting loyalties meant shifting priorities.

When he became part of the 158 Crew after a unanimous vote, he crawled through the dark underbelly of the outlaw biker world and he did most of his crawling with Sean Cady, another 158er. What he remembered most about all that was his early days as a 158er. One afternoon he pulled his hog up behind the Pittsburgh clubhouse and Sean Cady was standing there with another 158er named Arthur Vituro whom everyone called "Butch."

Whereas Cady was trim and hard, looking more like a seasoned hardass longshoreman than a biker with his steel-gray crewcut, pock-marked face, and muscular arms, Butch was a stereotypical 1%er in every way. Massive as a human gorilla with a belly like a feedbag and arms like dock pilings, at 6'5, 300 or so pounds, a shaggy beard trailing to his chest, long greasy hair hanging down to his shoulders, he was an absolute animal. His face was scarred, lips twisted in a sardonic smirk, and it was rumored in the Disciples underworld that he had at least a dozen bodies out there before he lost count. He was also the nephew of Popeye Scarpetti, the reigning crime boss in Pittsburgh at the time, which gave him enormous power and flexibility in criminal circles.

Slaughter knew two things for sure about him: he was not only insane but he was a psychopath that killed for the sheer pleasure of it. When he jointed a body, cut it up for disposal, he drooled. When he killed someone, he foamed at the mouth. Later, he was murdered by the Hell's Angels for blowing up one of their clubhouses, but that day in the lot behind the Pittsburgh clubhouse, he was in his prime.

Cady motioned Slaughter over and popped the truck on a black sedan. In the back was a black guy who had been beaten so savagely he was blown-up purple, limbs broken, face just a swollen mass of livid flesh.

"We got some trash we got to take out," Cady told Slaughter.

They took the body out to the Beaver Run Reservoir in Westmoreland County and rowed out into the deeps in a rowboat that belonged to Butch who, amazingly, was an avid fisherman when he wasn't slitting throats and busting heads.

"Watch how this is done," Cady said, a cigarette hanging from his lower lip. "You'll wanna remember this."

Butch pulled out a carving knife that was sharp enough to bisect a hair lengthwise. “You don’t want your stiff floating back up, Johnny, so you got to puncture it.” Drool hanging from his mouth, Butch stabbed the corpse in the belly seven or eight times so the gas could escape. He giggled while he did it. Then he punctured the lungs. “You don’t mind if I let the air out of your tires, do you?” he asked the stiff. Afterwards, the body was wrapped in chains and hooked to cinderblocks and down it went to the bottom where, Slaughter figured, its bones were to this day.

There hadn’t been a lot of murders, but enough so that at night, when he closed his eyes, he started seeing his victims. But that was life in the criminal world of the 158 Crew and once you were in, like wearing the Disciples patch, you were in. Blood in, blood out, they called it. You killed to get in the 158 Crew and only death would get you out.

He lay there, smoking again, thinking about his kid brother and the killing and violence that had led up to this moment, and felt absolutely nothing. The only warmth in him was for the club and his kid brother. He let himself feel for nothing else.

He could hear trees rustling in the night wind, a deeper and abiding silence just beneath. Somewhere out there a wolf howled out its despair and the silence returned, zipping up the world. Now the night was dead and he told himself that nothing living could inhabit such a dark and primordial silence.

There was only him.

Nothing else.

The last man on earth, the last living thing in a poisoned, sickened, and gutted world. Even if it wasn’t true, he felt it to his core and believed it, if only for a few short moments of panic.

He butted the cigarette and rolled over in the womb of night. He was filled with a hundred conflicting emotions no one would ever know about or truly suspect—hatred and anger, formless terror and creeping fear, the far-away love for his brother and the knowledge that he couldn’t afford to fuck this one up. Inch by inch, it was all banished as sleep came over him, coveting him, owning him, sinking him into the dark cradle of oblivion. He drifted off, sliding away, seeing the walking dead and mutant spiders and all manner of frightful and ravenous night stalkers…then something else, something much worse invading the byways of dream: Black Hat. The clown-white, horribly pitted face of Black Hat riding the sky like a harvest

moon. The grinning sardonic mouth and glistening pink eyes. That's what he saw…and then it dissolved into worms. The resurrection worms…a boiling, writhing storm of them coming out at him from a black sky seamed red and purple, a vortexual maelstrom of scarlet worms entwining and slithering in a colossal pulsating mass that slowly broke apart to reveal what was beneath: a face. A huge, floating, perfectly obscene face coming at him. It was the face of a hag, marble-gray, seamed and wrinkled and convoluted with deep-etched ruts and hollow pockets, a bubbling white graveyard fungus growing up over the chin and cheeks. There were but three or four blackened, stubby teeth in her mouth. Her eyes were vivid pockets of blood set in pallid sockets. A secret channel of wind rustled her hair, which was not hair at all but worms, thousands of worms threading out of her skull. She kept coming closer and Slaughter thrashed in his sleep, trying to hide his dream-self from her, trying to squeeze himself into a river of shadows… but she only got closer. *We're waiting for you, Disciple, for you have been named. We're all waiting for you*, she said in not one voice but perhaps a dozen, all discordant and screeching, filled with a deranged torment and a limitless suffering. *Out here. Out in the west. Out in the Deadlands and cemeteries and the tombs of men, in narrow boxes and seeping charnel depths, we wait for you. Come unto us, Disciple. Bring us our burnt offerings and our racks of meat prepared by thine own hand—*

Slaughter came awake, his face shining with sweat.

A nightmare, some crazy distorted nightmare that made no sense, yet he felt it made all the sense in the world and could not get past the feeling that he had just caught a glimpse of something he would soon know much better.

Black Hat. The worms. The hag. All part of the same thing, some monstrous and infernal engine of death.

It was well over an hour before he dared to close his eyes again.

Chapter Fifteen

They were eating their way into North Dakota mile by mile, chewing up the pavement and liking the taste, cracking open those throttles so they could eat their fill. They rode in formation, high and tight, six street-eaters gripping ape hangers with their boots up on the Easy Rider pegs. Jumbo was at the wheel of the War Wagon playing tag with them just behind. Slaughter had it figured that if they could keep moving like this, sliding down the old highway, they could make the Devil's Lake locale by mid-afternoon tomorrow. And ever since he had that fucked-up fever dream of the worms and the face the night before he wasn't sure if he wanted to get there or turn around and head back.

You ain't afraid of a little old dream, are you?

No and yes. Because he had the worst possible feeling deep inside that it was no dream at all. Call it a prophecy. Call it a vision. Call it whatever you wanted, but it was haunting him. It had set down deep, snaking roots in the dry stony soil of his soul and it was planning on hanging around. It was part physical sensation and part psychic certainty. But it was there. It was flowing in his veins like venom.

He had to get to Devil's Hole.

He had to get to that NORAD complex.

He had to get that bio out of there.

He had to save his brother's ass.

But even so, even as dangerous as that all was going to be, he felt that it was purely peripheral. It was the skin of this sad tale. The real meat lay beneath. Tucked in the hot red stuff down there in the bones was where he was going to find Black Hat and the hag from his dream. Because they or *it* were waiting there. Waiting for him.

Around noon they got into it.

Things had been cool and easy and Slaughter figured something was coming. He figured something *had* to be coming, this deep in the guts of the Deadlands. And then, just ahead, sweeping around the corner and putting on the speed was death: twenty bikers that he knew without a doubt were outriders of Cannibal Corpse. A wolfpack. Unlike the Disciples they chewed the pavement in a loose, sprawling sort of formation.

There was no way to avoid them, no time to slow down and double-back.

No time to get the bikes in the Wagon. No time for anything but to clash head-on and that's the way it was going to be. If the Disciples ran for cover, the riders would be on them before they could dismount. Jumbo came over the walkie-talkie. *"You better go to ground, John. They ain't slowing down."* But Slaughter told him there was no time. Had they been in the Wagon they could've played slice-and-dice with the Cannibals using the cow-catcher, but it wasn't going to be like that.

Both Slaughter and Moondog agreed that something like this was bound to happen sooner or later (and, realistically, it could have been worse: it could have been the Red Hand coming at them with machine guns and heavy artillery instead of these deadheads). So that morning they broke out the M16A2 rifles they'd gotten from Brightman. They duct-taped the barrels to the handlebar mounts of their bikes with the stocks and trigger guards resting on the gas tanks sideways, making room for the magazines and providing easy access. Moondog said that in World War I the allied pilots of the British, French, and American forces were getting their asses handed to them by the German aces in their Fokkers triplanes. The allies had a gunner in back, while the Germans had a machine gun mounted in front that the pilot fired. The pilot used line-of-sight firing directed by the position of the aircraft instead of some gunner in the back trying to swing his machine gun around at swift moving and dipping planes. Something that never worked.

And that's what the Disciples would do.

Line-of-sight.

Rider-directed.

He gave the signal to the others to go in flogging, wide open. They throttled up, spread out, made ready to meet the bikers dead-on. Slaughter knew from his extensive prison reading that during the Civil War, the Confederate mounted cavalry was considered invincible, untouchable,

unstoppable. Then George Custer re-wrote the book. He led wild charges directly into the heart of Confederate cavalry units, cutting through them like a knife, shooting and hacking with his saber, scattering the enemy to the four winds. And thus ending the myth of Confederate cavalry superiority.

Again, that's what they were going to do right now.

The riders came at them and there was no doubt by then that these were Cannibal Corpse riders—those that had faces as such were leathery masks pitted with holes and others were eaten right down to the bone. They rode muddy hogs painted flat black or primer red, most on ratbikes that had been thrown together out of spare parts.

When they were in range, the Disciples opened up with a devastating barrage. Seven or eight of the Cannibals were blown off their mounts and it took some serious trick-riding to avoid the spinning bikes and tumbling riders.

They all made it through the first pass save for Irish, who rolled over a Cannibal Corpse rider, lost control, and slammed into one of their bikes, stacking his own mount on the pavement, low-ending it in a violent tabletop slide.

There was no time to go to his aid.

They pulled off the road, circled around just as Jumbo plowed through the zombie ranks, knocking a half dozen more to the road and catching another on the cow-catcher and dragging him and his bike thirty feet in a smear of blood and oil and motorcycle parts.

Slaughter came back around without hesitation.

The Cannibals came to meet him and it was one of those ice-pure, hot/cold Zen moments that he had experienced only once or twice in his life and usually at a time like this—right in the heat of battle. It was like everything momentarily ground to a halt, total slo-mo, video jumping slowly frame by frame by frame. He saw the wormboy bikers, six or seven of them bearing down on him, and was amazed at the sheer wrath and sheer fucking ugliness of them. Their faces were beyond simple comic book rot, but a wild and perpetually maggoty delirium of slack-jawed screams, scarification and random impalements, insect-eaten, flyblown, runny/pus-juicing/vomited-clotted expulsions of pulpous ooze.

They came at him and he inched forward to meet them.

The world was soundless, a dead vacuum in some distorted cul-de-sac of space and time. He watched them come to kill him, to slobber on his brains or heave blood-slicked resurrection worms down his throat, and he saw his death and did not fear it, but accepted it, saw the smooth transition and the calming crystal purity of abandoning the flesh, for once it was gone and you were divorced of it…no more pain or suffering or torment or worry or fear. A butterfly taking wing from a pupa, breaking free and gliding in the warm summer night of eternity—

Click.

That Zen moment, so fleeting and existential, was gone and the physical world pushed back in. He saw those dead riders as they saw him and he was just John Slaughter, outlaw biker and criminal hardcase, barbarian on an iron horse, his belly filled with acid and his soul smoldering with rage and hate and kill-happy enthusiasm.

When the Cannibals were twenty feet from him, he squeezed the trigger on the M16 and, lookee there, these deadheads were capable of learning because as soon as the rounds started to fly two of them broke free, cutting away from the wolfpack. But the others were strafed by slugs that made them hop and jerk, made one of them fall right out of the saddle and strike his head on the pavement with such velocity that it exploded on impact, spraying a gore-soup of rot and filth—and one surprised worm—over the blacktop.

But one or more of those rounds chewed into a gas tank and there was a resounding *varoom!* as it went up in a fiery eruption, spreading a curtain of flame fifteen feet in every direction, letting loose a burst of flechette shrapnel which were the remains of the gas tank itself.

Burning, four Cannibals lost control of their rides and skidded out, but one came right at Slaughter with a toothy mortuary grin and that was because he held a hatchet in one claw-hand and, despite the fact that one of his eyes was a yellow gummy soup and the other was swinging free by the stalk, he was bringing it forward in a perfect arc that would have taken Slaughter’s head right off.

But he ducked.

The hatchet slashed empty air.

The forward momentum and the wild swing threw the Cannibal off balance and he lost control, the bike going one way and he going the other. Slaughter never saw that, for as he cut hard to the left to avoid another

Cannibal bearing down on him, he found the gravel at the edge of the road and lost control himself. His scoot skidded out and he was tossed mercifully into the long grass and then down into the ditch amongst some desiccated cattails that broke apart in a storm of soft fuzz.

The first thing he did was pull the bluesteel Combat Mag in one quick motion like a gunfighter unleathering his Navy six. Just in time, too, for a big hulking Cannibal Corpse whose face was more maggots than face stepped up to the edge of the ditch, grinning, his flat black eyes filled with secret triumph. *Well, what do we got here?* But what he got instead of easy meat for the chewing was the business end of the Mag and then Slaughter squeezed the trigger. The Mag boomed and a .357 round went right through the zombie's forehead, coring him, sliding through his skull like a drill bit and taking most of what was inside out the back of his head. In fact, when the slug went through, the impact broke his skull part and the top of his head jumped three inches like a hat blown up in the wind and came right down in a splash of red/black slime and the zombie folded right up.

Of course, the rest of the Disciples were hardly standing still during this time.

Apache Dan and Shanks were still on their bikes, jousting with the Cannibals, Fish was on the road shooting zombies off their mounts and Moondog had his machete out and was busy decapitating the downed Cannibals. What he didn't see was a huge walking slab of carrion descend on him with a lead pipe, but Jumbo did. By that time he was on his sweet '54 Panhead like a knight that realized he'd almost missed the fun. He roared into the fray and when the big zombie was bearing down on Moondog, he popped a wheelie and slammed the front tire right into the side of the corpse's head.

They both went down and just as quickly, they were both up, going at it bare fisted.

Slaughter climbed out of the ditch and saw what he wanted right away: the Cannibal Corpse with the hatchet. Among the other patches on his leather vest was one that read: VICE-PRESIDENT. St. Louis chapter and not Kansas City, but still…Vice-Prez.

He saw Slaughter.

Slaughter saw him.

They charged at each other, the Cannibal holding up his hatchet and Slaughter unsheathing his *Kukri.* It would have been so much easier to pop

the zombie with the Combat Mag, but that's not what Slaughter wanted. Sometimes, in the thick of battle with so much indiscriminate, impersonal killing going on with guns, there was a call to the knife. A need to swing and taste blood. Smell it. Feel it. To watch your prey go down dead. Maybe it was an instinctual thing, but he had felt it before.

The Cannibal came at him with a high-pitched war cry that was somewhere between a howling wolf and a mad dog. Black ribbons of slime flew from his mouth and a slop of maggots was expelled from his left nostril.

"Come on!" Slaughter called out at him. "Bring your gamey ass on!"

The Cannibal vice-prez came in with wild slashing motions of the hatchet which, although not controlled, were fast and vicious and much more powerful than Slaughter expected from a deadhead. He got under them and around them and lashed out with his left foot, catching the vice-prez in the back and throwing him forward.

He brought the Gurkha knife around, the eighteen-inch blade just missing the back of the zombie's neck. The vice-prez whirled back around, making a chattering/cackling sound and lunged.

Slaughter dropped back, slid on the gravel and went on his ass.

The zombie struck out with the hatchet. Missed. Brought it down again and Slaughter rolled away, scrambling to his feet.

The vice-prez swung his hatchet.

Slaughter swung his *Kukri*.

The blades clattered in mid-air and Slaughter felt the numbing shock of it right up to his elbow. He danced back as the hatchet came again and then again. He spun around and slashed open the zombie's chest, and it would have been a near-fatal cut for a living man but to this deadhead it was just a flesh wound.

He got out of the way of the hatchet, slashed at the zombie's arm, made contact, peeling free a chunk of greening meat. And the hatchet came within inches of his face but the swing threw the vice-prez off balance and Slaughter leaped. He brought the Gurkha knife down with full-force into the zombie's face and it sounded like an axe splitting black oak.

The zombie cried out, its last good eye shattered in a splash of yellow serum. A rancid blood poured from his split face, a thick and curdy sort of blood that was squirming with graveworms. He swung the hatchet and

Slaughter ducked under it and brought the *Kukri* into the back of his neck. The zombie gagged out clots of tissue in a vomit gush of bile and blood.

He dropped the hatchet.

Slaughter slashed him across the throat, took one hand off at the wrist, then brought the Gurkha blade to bear, slitting off the top of the vice-prez's head. He tottered weakly, barely staying up, screaming out in rage and pure hate, then he began to come apart as if the damage done to him was the catalyst that broke him apart from the inside out. He went to his knees, face hanging by threads of gore, and Slaughter smelled one violent odor after another—flesh-rot, formaldehyde, dry hay, hot bacterial decay—and the zombie crashed into a heap of dusty, moth-eaten, dank-smelling debris. Then goo spurted out…black blood and creamy white marrow, yellow globs of liquid fat, and lastly, a fountaining eruption of maggots that steamed and sizzled and went to chalky grave-paste.

The skull had broken apart with the rest…but the jaws were still intact and the teeth chattered like they were cold.

Slaughter kicked them away.

The dead were all over the highway. None had escaped. Several of the corpses were still burning, letting off greasy plumes of black smoke that carried a sharp, nauseating stink of burnt hair. The bikes of the Disciples were scattered about. Several of the Cannibal Corpse bikes were burning along with their riders. The remains of the zombies were splashed over the road.

Jumbo and Moondog were squatted over Irish who was torn up and glistening with blood. He wasn't moving. Shanks was standing there, just staring down at him. Fish was walking around with a dazed look on his blood-streaked face, stomping the worms that crawled out of the dead zombies with his motorcycle boots. Apache Dan saw Slaughter coming, the gore-dripping *Kukri* still in his fist. He looked over at him, the left side of his face discolored by a livid bruise, blood on his mouth, a smear of grease over his face like warpaint. When Slaughter met his eyes, he just shook his head.

Slaughter wiped his blade off on the colors of a Cannibal Corpse and sheathed it.

He stooped down by Irish who had gotten mangled in the slide he took. He put his hand in Irish's hair, brushed a few strands from his face, said something silently and stood up.

“Let’s plant him proper,” he said.

They buried Irish in the field, in a hole set there amongst the waving yellow switchgrass. When they had filled it in, they stood around somberly and stared down at the grave. No one spoke. There were things that could have been said for their fallen comrade but no one had the heart to speak. They just stared down and remembered the hard rides and fast times and how it all came rushing to an end out here when he stacked his bike. He would have been happy knowing he’d gone out on his scoot. It was all he could have asked for.

Wiping moisture from his eyes, Fish bent down, scooped up some grave-dirt in his palm and let it fall through his fingers. “See you on the other side, my brother.”

The others followed him back to the road, silently.

Chapter Sixteen

Freak weather pattern.

That's what Slaughter thought as they entered another valley and the fog swept up to meet them. One of those freak weather patterns that happened from time to time and it really meant nothing. Warm southern air sweeping up and meeting cold air coming down from Canada. That's all it was. Yet… the way it seemed to shimmer, lighting from slate-gray to a dull and luminous yellow…it was unnerving. Unnatural. He couldn't stop thinking about the last foggy valley they'd gone through and he wasn't about to put himself or his brothers through that again. They'd been through enough.

"Nobody's blaming you, man," Apache Dan said. "Irish went out the way he would have wanted."

Slaughter just stared into the fog. He was at the wheel of the War Wagon and when he was driving a cage like this—or *any* cage—he started thinking too much and feeling too much until his insides seemed to twist up and get sucked down into a black hole inside of him. And Apache Dan always seemed to know. Always.

"Yeah, but I can't help feeling like shit about it. Irish knew what he was getting into, but if he was still in-stir—"

"If he was still in-stir, man, he'd be rotting away in a fucking cell. This way he got to be with his brothers. He was a Disciple again. Wearing the colors meant the world to him. Same as it does to you and me and the rest of these animals," Apache Dan told him. "He got to ride again. He got to fight again. He died in the saddle with his fucking boots on and that's all any Disciple wants."

"I guess you're right."

"I'm always right, bro. Just like when I tell you I don't like how this is shaking—another valley, more fog. It gives me bad thoughts."

"Me, too."

“The boys are getting nervous back there.”

Slaughter listened to them fooling around in the back. Playing cards. Betting with both hands. Insulting each other. Fish telling more lurid tales of his sex life. Seemed like they were doing okay…but were they? He thought their voices sounded strained, their laughter a little too forced and a little too loud as if they were overcompensating.

“I hear you,” he said. “I’m nervous, too. I’m taking her in slow. We see anything…spiders or anything…we turn around. You got my word on that.”

“That’s good enough for me, bro.”

But what if this isn’t just garden-variety fog? Slaughter asked himself after Apache Dan went to sit in on a hand in the back. *What if it’s something else? Something worse? Something…dangerous?*

He knew it sounded paranoid…but what if there was something funny about it? What if this wasn’t just fog but some cloud of radioactive waste that had drifted down from a leaking reactor or oozed up out of the earth from some toxic waste dump set free by the use of multi-megaton nukes? And hadn’t he heard something about a nuclear power plant in Nebraska going supercritical with a core meltdown since the Outbreak? Clouds of fallout could drift for hundreds of miles before coming to earth. He knew that much. Maybe that explained the Valley of the Spiders (as he was now calling it) and maybe that explained this valley, too.

Then again, man, maybe it’s just fog.

Lacking a Geiger counter or those little radiation detection badges people wore around atomic reactors, there was no way to know. Slaughter decided he’d keep the radiation thing to himself.

The fog kept coming, rolling and billowing like a breeze was pushing it along, making it foam and expand and thicken in some sort of chemical reaction like when vinegar and baking soda mix.

Slaughter kept the War Wagon rolling at around thirty an hour, plenty fast enough in that soup. It was like a noxious weave out there, thickening, fuming. He was thinking things, of course. Mutant spiders. Radioactivity. A breakdown…damn, they blew a tire in this shit and somebody would have to go out and fix it. The idea of that was unthinkable…as if the mist might swallow them alive or reveal things that might turn their hair white.

Jesus, you better get a grip, man. These boys are counting on your cool head, your ability to think. Don’t let them down.

He lit a cigarette, thinking it was amusing—and more than a little disturbing—how this foggy valley was making him feel, pushing him back towards superstition and childhood fears. *Him.* Goddamn John Slaughter, chapter president of the Pittsburgh Devil's Disciples, member of the feared 158 Crew. A guy who'd served time in some of the worst joints in the system. A guy who'd fought and killed for his club. A guy who'd been shot twice and stabbed half a dozen times and once took on three inmates with pipes out in the yard at Leavenworth.

Afraid? Is that it, man? This is scaring you?

But *fear* wasn't a word he was comfortable with. He preferred to think he was feeling extremely cautious and extremely hesitant. That went down better.

But it was the fog.

It had to be the fog.

It was so very dense and endless, an ocean of mist. It made him feel, again, like maybe he was the last person on earth. The way a sailor might feel at sea when he was trapped in a fog bank, knowing it could be hours or even days before he slipped out the back door. It made Slaughter feel claustrophobic, like he was pressed down in a dark tunnel or buried alive, the air becoming thin and foul and unbreathable.

"Enough of that shit," he said under his breath.

Looking in the rearview, he could see nothing but the fog bunching behind the Wagon, tinted red by the brake lights. To either side, it was the same. And in front, almost worse, as if it was getting thicker and more congested. Jesus, like driving into the mouth of a foundry smokestack. It looked almost frothy like something whipped up with a whisk. In the headlights, he could see it coalescing and building, drowning the Wagon in that brooding haze.

It was getting worse, there was no doubt of that, like some steam valve had been left wide open.

There was fear in him even if he did not want to admit it. He could feel it prickling his insides like he'd swallowed pins.

Apache Dan came up front. "I checked the map. We should be out of this valley in fifteen, twenty minutes tops."

"Sure."

Together, they couldn't seem to stop staring out into the fog.

It was thick and fine and consuming like the guts of a blizzard. Also like a blizzard, it was in constant swirling, rolling motion, spinning and seething, a busy storm cloud building and covering. It had a funny, almost metallic sheen to it as if it was saturated with microscopic flakes of aluminum. The headlights bounced right off it, filling the cab of the War Wagon with a moonish glow. Slaughter didn't know if it was his imagination or not, but he began to see *shapes* in it, weird, darting forms like figures in motion dancing away just out of sight. And above too, shapes circling in the fog like witches taking to the air.

But he figured it was like staring into static on an old TV…sooner or later, your eyes would begin to see patterns and contours where none really existed. That's all it was.

Then he saw something.

A man…something like a man…with shining eyes at the side of the road.

"You see that?"

Apache Dan's voice was dry. "Yeah," he said.

By that point, Slaughter's teeth were clenched and his scalp felt tight and crawling, a chill running down his shoulders and over his chest.

Keep it together, man, just keep it together.

Now and again, the fog thinned enough where he could catch an occasional glimpse of the countryside and what he saw was like some netherworld of dark, blasted earth cut by jagged gullies and craters, a few dead trees rising up like withered skeletons. He wasn't sure what to make of it, but he was certain that North Dakota did not look like that. If anything, it looked like France or Belgium in World War I, scarred and gutted and stripped by artillery barrages.

It wasn't right.

None of it was right.

Some kind of battle or something had been waged here. He hoped it had been with conventional weapons and that they weren't all being saturated with radiation.

"This is the shit, all right," Apache Dan said as if reading his mind.

Maybe it was the fear of atomic fallout or that business with the spiders, but his nerves were steadily fraying and his guts were pulled up into his chest now in cold, knotted tangles.

"We gotta ride out of this soon."

Another five minutes of white-knuckled driving and Slaughter saw a hulking shape in the gloom: the remains of a high stone wall that was crumbling now into debris. There were great holes punched through it like it had been hit by rockets. And then, everywhere, countless buildings and towers and huts rising up into the mist, every one of them derelict and shattered like London after the blitz. Some were nothing but great heaps of rubble, others standing but set with yawning chasms and ragged voids, roofs ripped free and walls gone to wreckage. He glimpsed low doorways and hooded windows, nothing beyond them but a grainy blackness. It looked like some Medieval town after a siege…just gutted and broken and pulverized. What did still stand looked ready to fall. No life there, just cloying shadows and drifting pockets and tendrils of mist.

"Where the hell are we?" he said under his breath.

"Don't look much like North Dakota, does it?" Apache admitted.

Slowly then, the other Disciples bunching up front with them, Slaughter moved the Wagon through twisting streets, the tires bumping along, maybe over rubbish and bricks and maybe over a road that was no longer pavement, but cobblestones. And as disconcerting as that was, what was worse was that the tombyard of fragmented ruins stretching around them might have been dead and ancient, but they were not unoccupied. He kept seeing vague shapes moving through the rot and devastation, like men or women, hunched and shambling. But every time it seemed like he might glimpse one dragging itself into view through a ruptured doorway, the mist rolled back in, obscuring his view.

Something was telling him that might be a good thing.

"What kind of fucking place is this?" Fish said.

Jumbo and Moondog said nothing; they just watched.

The half-glimpsed figures sliding from the fog stopped when they heard or saw the Wagon coming. They stood there, swaying from side to side, until Slaughter got in close and then they scampered off. Not running or fleeing as men would, but moving with an almost pained loping or hopping motion.

There.

Right before the Wagon now, a figure standing in the middle of the road.

It was not going to move.

"Run that fucker down," Fish said

The mist blew around it, making it look like steam was coming off it. As the War Wagon got in closer, splashing the figure with headlights, it lifted its arms and waved back and forth like it wanted them to stop. Slaughter did not stop—didn't dare to—but he slowed. Slowed so that he saw the figure wore little better than rags. Huge, shapeless filthy garments like gunny sacks or motheaten tarps.

"Maybe…maybe we better see what they want," Jumbo said, a huge and bear-like man, fearsome in battle and loyal as hell…but down deep, oddly compassionate for an outlaw biker. Almost motherly.

"Don't do it," Moondog said. As warlord he only cared about the skins of the Disciples.

Slaughter slowed to a stop, sighing, wondering if he was fucking up big this time. Worse than usual.

Give 'em the benefit of the doubt. They try anything, run 'em down.

The figure kept waving its arms frantically and even that close, there was no telling if it was a she or a he, though *it* seemed a better choice as it got closer.

"Man," Apache Dan said. "Would you look at that…"

The figure's head looked like a lopsided ball of decayed suet, lumpy and leprous, set with numerous holes like worms had been tunneling through it. You could not tell where the eyes were or if it even had hair, but there was a jagged crevice that might have been called a mouth. The hands it waved over its head were equally as grotesque…gnarled growths of white meat ending in limp digits like gloves with no fingers in them.

"Mutants," Moondog said. "Fucking mutants."

Others were gathering now.

Two and three, and then five and six. Finally a dozen with more coming out of the mist all the time, gathering around the Wagon in a mob of maimed, inhuman faces and distorted bodies. Like lepers or the victims of some horrendous atomic fallout, every one of them hunched and deformed, faces like puddled and congealed wax riddled with holes and scabrous sores. Even with the windows closed, you could hear them grunting and squealing as they attempted something like speech.

"C'mon, man," Fish said. "Get us the fuck out of here."

Slaughter sat there, gripping the wheel, eyes peeled wide, mouth set in a narrow white line. What held him there, making him stare and making his heart hitch painfully in his chest was just a dumb and senseless mute horror.

It sucked the will from him. He could not move, could not think of doing so, some childlike instinct telling him that if he waited like that long enough, like a bird trying to fool a snake by remaining motionless, they would leave the Wagon alone.

"John…shit, let's go," Fish said.

"Take it easy," Moondog told him.

"Take it easy? Look at those fucking *things.*"

Slaughter let out a long, low sigh. "I wanna see what they're going to do."

The figures made no threatening movements, not really, they just stood there in the rolling mist, swaying from side to side, those hideously scarred faces peering through the windows. Some of them gestured, trying to get those in the Wagon to come out, it seemed.

But that wasn't going to happen.

Slaughter wasn't exactly uncharitable. He'd decided when he first got the idea of going into the Deadlands that if somebody needed help, he'd help them. Like he had with Rice.

But this…no, the idea of physical contact with one of those abominations was unthinkable. The sight of them was bad enough, let alone coming into close physical proximity with them.

The mutants were not leaving.

They began making loud, slobbering noises, almost as if they were getting excited about something. A few pressed their faces to the plexiglass window ports on the door, leaving sticky strands of something behind. It looked almost like snot. One of them began slapping a diseased hand against the driver's side window and it actually *smashed* like a rotting mushroom, leaving a juicy smear on the glass.

They were all getting excited now, thudding their hands against the War Wagon and making those awful sounds.

Well, what's it gonna be? Slaughter asked himself. *You gonna sit here until them ugly pricks find their way in or are you gonna hit that gas pedal and paste 'em?*

There wasn't much a choice.

Not really.

"Fuck this," he said.

He revved the engine and blared the horn. The mutants stepped back, began mulling in tight little throngs as if they were trying to figure out what

to do. Slaughter threw the Wagon in drive and as it started to roll, something incredible happened. One by one, the mutants began to leave the ground, began to drift upwards like they were filled with helium. Like gas-filled bags they levitated and steadily began to rise.

Slaughter stomped on the accelerator.

The Wagon vaulted forward, knocking aside a few of the mutants that hadn't as yet begun to ascend. The impact made splashing sounds like they were living water balloons. A few others that were not above the level of the Wagon got battered aside, exploding into rains of fluid and flesh and mulch. Slaughter kept his foot on the pedal and plowed forward, finding the road and staying on it. Part of his mind had shut down now and he felt like he was operating completely on remote control. He turned the wipers on high to brush away the oozing anatomies of the things he had smashed open.

Then the town was falling behind them, consumed by the mist.

The fog did not abate, but the road was open.

"Push it, John!" Fish said. "Get us out of here!"

Pavement now.

Good old blacktop.

Later, maybe, they could try and make sense of this. Explain it if they could. But for now there was the simple animal act of evasion and escape—

But it wasn't going to be that easy.

Something thudded onto the roof of the Wagon.

Then something else.

Soon lots of things were bumping into it, sounding like a dozen men walking around up there. But it was not men, Slaughter knew. And they were not walking. It was those mutants. They were drifting along in the fog, keeping pace with the Wagon, a swarm of them, and they were dropping down like marionettes from time to time and landing on the roof. He saw a couple of them—one lacking arms—drop down onto the hood and then leap back up into the fog. If any of it had hinted at madness before, this was out and out insanity. A mushy, dripping hand slid down from the roof and slapped against the passenger side window. A slimy, waxy face pressed itself against the windshield and then retreated. Lots of them were doing that now. Upside down, they were descending headfirst, just hanging there, staring.

Fish was beyond himself. "JUST LEAVE US ALONE!" he screamed at them. "GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM US!"

But they were not leaving.

A few daring individuals began lowering themselves from the fog just in front of the Wagon, dropping and rising, dropping and rising with almost comical timing. One of them came swooping out of the fog like a moth and the cow-catcher slammed right into it. Unlike the others, this one did not explode into juice and jelly and muck…it simply vaporized into a great cloud of yellow dust that spattered against the windshield, the wipers brushing it aside with chalky yellow streaks.

Another came.

And another, each one exploding into a cloud of yellow mist that covered the windshield and nearly forced Slaughter off the road. Three, then four, and finally five of them committed suicide in the same way, darting out of the fog directly into the speeding path of the War Wagon. Each one vaporizing into the same yellow, profuse cloud.

Then he knew.

They were not killing themselves.

They were *sporing*.

Like stepped-on puffballs, they were vomiting out millions of tiny spores. Spreading their seed. Reproducing. Like fungi. Fruiting bodies. They required an external stimulus to set their spores free. Slaughter could smell them…sickening and sweet, bitter and sharp.

But they were gone now, the mutants. Just gone, and there was only that gaseous envelope of fog which began to thin. Visibility increased. The fog went thin and membranous, became nothing more than straggling tendrils of mist that blew away and then Slaughter could see the world again, see the fields and forest and the road climbing up out of that terrible valley. When the Wagon got to the top, he saw freedom and it had never tasted so good.

“I’m glad to be out of that,” Apache Dan said.

“In the future we might want to steer clear of valleys,” Moondog said.

“I can dig that,” Jumbo said, breathing out.

“But what was that place back there?” Fish said to Slaughter, not only wanting to know but needing to know. It had all scared him badly and like most people, he had the tendency to dwell on things like that. To overanalyze and over-scrutinize them. It was his way of pulling their teeth so they couldn’t bite him anymore. And this one in particular needed to be

minutely dissected, labeled, and stuck in its jar of alcohol where it would do no more harm.

“I don’t know,” Slaughter told him. “We got out of it, so who cares? Mutants and shit. That’s what it was.”

“But that place…it looked fucking Medieval or something.”

“Sure. Crazy. Maybe some tourist trap designed to look Medieval.”

“But what do you think, John? I mean, what do you really think?”

Slaughter lit a cigarette and watched the road. “I don’t think, bro. Things are easier that way.”

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning, he was out riding point on his hardtail an easy half a mile in front of the pack. It was something Moondog and he had come up with. Traveling together, bunched-up, they were begging for an ambush, so they decided that someone had to be point. Someone that could warn the others.

Slaughter took it.

The others didn't want him to, but this was his thing as far as he was concerned. He was the leader of this ratpack, the Disciples were under his wing, and they were here because of him. He had more at stake than the others. It was personal with him, therefore the biggest risk should be his.

So he rode out front and the pack hung far back because that's the way it had to be. When he was on a good stretch of straightaway he could see the pack behind him kicking up dust, but when the road curved or dipped down he lost sight of them and then he was the last man on earth riding into the mouth of hell.

As he ate up those miles, knowing that Devil's Lake was maybe four or five hours away now, he thought about Poe's poem *The Conqueror Worm*, and the grim inevitability of death. Funny how he hadn't thought about that in many, many years until he'd capped that Cannibal Corpse on the highway. Now he couldn't seem to get it out of his head, and it seemed that the farther west he went, the more it took hold of him and the more it seemed to be saying to him. It was morbid shit, but the Deadlands were a morbid place, and as far as he was concerned he had only scratched the skin.

He passed through a couple of little towns that were deserted and devastated. One of them was burned nearly flat. The others just empty. Not a scavenging dog or a wormboy to be had. Nothing and no one. Outside the last one there was a crossroads and some kind of half-assed pagan altar had

been tacked together. He went by it fast so he didn't get a real good look at it, but what he did see was a heap of bones, big bones, maybe from a cow or a buffalo, lots of feathers and braided cornshocks, a scarecrow up on a crossbar splashed with paint. At least…he thought it was a scarecrow.

Then the country was open prairie save for scrub pine and juniper, clustered silverberry and bushy staghorn verging the road, dogwood along streams and river cuts. The road was meandering, serpentine, left to right and right to left, lots of Day-Glo yellow signs with squiggly arrows on them.

He came around a bend thick with enshrouding juneberry and that's when the first shot rang out. Even over the roar of the hog he heard it. Then he heard another and another after that and it was about that time as he cut off the highway and into the prairie grass that he realized he'd driven right into a fucking ambush. Maybe if he'd been paying a little closer attention, it might not have happened.

No matter.

In the rearview he could see two pickup trucks with riders in the beds carrying rifles pulling off the road in hot pursuit. They were shooting, and thank God they were no marksmen. The reports of the rifles echoed again and again and a few rounds came close, but not too close. Slaughter was caning the hardtail now, riding fast and aggressively, seesawing this way and that, hoping they couldn't get a bead on him. The trucks behind him were thumping along into dips and holes and the shooters were barely hanging on. There was no way they'd get a clear shot like that.

Slaughter brought the scoot into a stand of heavy brush, dropped it and cut the M16 free of its bracket. He slipped through the bushes and fired two three-round bursts at the lead vehicle. The first volley went wild, the second hit the pickup, peppering the hood and popping a spiderwebbed hole in the windshield.

That slowed them.

They were shooting wildly now, expending cartridges everywhere. In the distance, an armored APC entered the field. The Red Hand. No doubt of that.

Slaughter got down low and pulled the walkie-talkie out of the inside of his vest. He got Apache Dan right away. "Ambush up ahead," he said over the box. "Get everyone off the road and into cover." There was some static, then, *"But what about you, bro?"* Slaughter thumbed the button. "Get 'em

to cover! They got an APC here, probably heavy machine guns! Get lost!” More static. *“Will do, bro. Keep it tight.”*

Slaughter came up out of the brush with the M16 again.

He zeroed in on one of the shooters in the back. He missed with his first volley and then popped the guy with the second. He cried out and fell from the bed of the truck and the second pickup couldn’t stop in time: it rolled right over him.

More shooting.

Lots of swearing and shouting.

But the trucks had stopped rolling.

Now was the time. Slaughter jumped on his hog, kicked it into life, and went flying out of the bushes, zigzagging again. More shots. But he rode low and fast, cutting around stands of brush and following a dry ravine until he was out of range. He came out into the grass and there were woods ahead, along a ridgeline. There was a footpath and he aimed the scoot up it. He could still hear the engines of the trucks and the APC, but distant now.

But they would compensate.

He couldn’t give them time to do that.

The path was rocky in the woods and the scoot bumped along, but he knew the Red Hand couldn’t follow him up here unless they came in on foot and if they did, then it would be his kind of fighting: close-in and personal. He cut across a stream then up a hill, down another, through another dry ravine and up a hillock and across a little footbridge. He kept his speed low. The hog wasn’t made for this off-road shit and with the hardtail frame, he felt every little bump hard right up into his hips. He kept going until the trees thinned and there was a two-rut dirt road below him. He cut down onto it and followed it maybe a mile and then cut into more open prairie, then into a cedar stand. By then, the Red Hand were nowhere to be seen or heard. He moved through the switchgrass until he found a gravel road that he guessed might swing back around and bring him within sight of the highway, but several miles back before he ran into the ambush. He kept going but saw no highway.

Finally, he rolled the hardtail into a stand of withered juniper and killed the engine. It was quiet. Real quiet. He tried to raise Apache Dan on the walkie-talkie but all he got was dead air. He hoped they were hid good and tight.

That’s all he cared about.

Because for right now, he himself was hopelessly lost.

* * *

Maybe an hour later, Slaughter came out of cover onto some pavement and overhead, there were dozens of buzzards circling. There was death nearby and the birds knew it. And to draw them in such numbers it must have been real thick, real good, and real meaty, none of which remotely concerned Slaughter because what was death in the big bad new world as envisioned by the Outbreak? Death was just death. It held little significance in the greater scheme of things. The living envied the dead, as it was said.

He followed the pavement as it moved through the countryside, knowing it was a secondary road and not the I, but hoping the two would meet up. He cracked open the throttle, kept an eye on the buzzards overhead, and eased his hog on down the road. Death was on his mind like it had been for so long now.

He thought about Black Hat.

He thought about the Hag.

And the more he thought about the both of them the more he thought he was probably fucking crazy.

But as he rode on, thinking death and such, that poem by Poe he'd memorized in the eighth grade kept bouncing around in his skull like a catchy tune you just can't rid yourself of:

Mutter and mumble low,
And hither and thither fly-Mere puppets they, who come and go
At bidding of vast formless things
That shift the scenery to and fro,
Flapping from out their Condor wings
Invisible Woe!

Yeah, that was it. That was the meat of the thing and he knew it: *puppets. Puppets that come and go to the bidding of vast and formless things.* It made all the sense in the world to him because it seemed that day by day it was all some crazy stage he was playing on and something above was manipulating his strings. And whoever or *what*ever that might have been

must have been one real sadistic motherfucker with an absolutely cruel sense of humor.

He drove on.

The road wound down into a little grassy glen and then came up through a sparse thicket and under a train bridge, right outside a little town called Victoria. Set out at the crossroads was another of those freaky little altars.

This time he was in no hurry, so he stopped.

He parked his scoot and hopped off, looking around carefully and strapping on the Combat Mag in case the shit started flying. The town was just before him and he could tell it was a dead place. The buzzards were circling directly overhead and he knew that there was death, recent death, in its streets. The wind was slight, warm, and dry. It smelled like hay and corn husks. When it shifted direction, it brought the stink of the town out to him: a hot, maggoty odor of decomposition.

But the altar…

Like the other one he'd passed, there were bones scattered all around it. Some were human—femurs and ulnas, a couple of ribcages, a few jawless skulls—but most were animal bones. Big, staff-like leg bones that must have belonged to antelope and heavy trains of vertebrae and rib baskets that were probably from buffalo or cow. Above them, nailed to a crude wooden cross was another scarecrow…except, as Slaughter looked closer, he saw it was a weathered, wind-dried corpse, a brown-skinned mummy with jutting bones who'd been slit open, emptied, then stuffed with things and stitched back up. The suturing looked like it had been done with shoelaces, and was haphazard at best. The corpse was bursting open, spilling an eclectic and bizarre collection of items: feathers and dried sacks of weeds, tiny bones braided together with sinew and little blackened things that looked like mummified rodents and reptiles.

Somebody had splashed yellow paint on the framework in the form of symbols that were long and slender, triangular and wedge-shaped, oddly cuneiform like ancient Sumerian glyphs. Slaughter had seen them in books when he was in-stir.

And that was not only weird, but frightening to see out here on the dirty backside of North Dakota. It made him think about things he did not want to think about at all.

He hopped back on the hardtail and rolled down the road to Victoria and the closer he got, the more that stench of death came out at him in a thick,

cloying mist of putrefaction. He was going to see something here that he would be better off *not* seeing and he knew it, yet, despite his feelings to the contrary, he rode on in. At first glance, Victoria was just like any other little ghost town: dusty windows, overgrown yards, fallen tree limbs and rusting cars at the curbs. Same old, same old.

Then it changed.

Radically.

There was a wide open sort of grassy field dead center of the town that might have been called a village green in another day and age. There was a monument there, probably to war dead. An old cannon, a few peeling benches, a weed-choked fountain. And…corpses.

This is what made him bring the scoot to a stop.

The green was set with wooden poles upon which were mounted what appeared to be hundreds of corpses. And not old withered things, but fresh cadavers bloating with charnel gases, distended and rubbery with decay, eyes pecked out by birds, faces boiling with worms, throats bearded with corpse flies. Many of those faces, if not all, were contorted and disfigured, mouths yawning wide as if they had died screaming in considerable agony. And Slaughter did not doubt that. For the poles they were set upon were dark with blood and drainage and he had no doubt that these men, women, children had been speared on the poles eight feet in the air while they were still alive. That the poles were sharpened to lethal points there was no doubt, for several corpses had gone soft to the point where they became mucid and mushy, sliding down the shafts until the points jutted from their throats like snapped vertebrae.

…Mere puppets they, who come and go…

Though the stink was black and rotten and nauseating, the air thick and moist with it, he stood there and stared, feeling the necessity to take it all in, to absorb it, to catalog and shelve it for future nightmares and long afternoons of yellow despair. For he would see this always. He would smell it and feel it and know it and remember it and forever it would rot inside of him, turning his core black with hate for the architect of this particular episode of massacre.

…At bidding of vast formless things…

He realized at this point that he was not standing still at all, that he was tottering from one foot to the other like maybe that invasive and purely revolting corpse-gas had made him weak in the knee and funny in the head

the way miners got once upon a time in the deep shafts when the air below thinned to a seam of poison.

None of these were zombies, he thought then. *If they were, they'd still be kicking. These were living people. Citizens. Innocent people who probably banded together here in Victoria for protection…only something got to them. Maybe the wormboys but probably something far worse. It got to them, sharpened up these stakes, then took them out here, one by one, and speared them through the crotches, probably tittering with cold, black laughter as they screamed and bled and writhed.*

The idea of it almost put Slaughter to his knees.

This was a badness, an atrocity, far beyond the living dead. And the most awful part of it was that he could still feel it in the air, the pain and horror and absolute terror of what had happened. The atmosphere was rank with suffering, soured by depravity.

But what did it mean?

Because, honestly, it had to mean *something.* Maybe he was worn out (he was) and maybe his mind wasn't exactly riding smoothly along its rails these days (it wasn't), but he was seeing a pattern. Old Black Hat was behind it or involved in it right to the core, as was the Hag. It was all part of something that made the wormboys themselves seem almost pedestrian in comparison.

But what?

Oh, don't be so stupid, Johnny. You know. You thought it the moment you saw it. Now just unlock your jaw and say it aloud.

So he did. Standing there with a burning cigarette in his trembling fingers, he gave it voice and spoke it unto the wind: *"Sacrifice."*

Because, yes, that's what this was and the only thing it could really, truly, possibly be. These people weren't killed out of anything as mundane as human sadism or even for food. They were murdered to appease something. Expiation. Burnt fucking offerings laid at the thorny feet of some nameless, pagan, malefic god of graveyards, gallows, and body pits.

That's what this was.

Blowing smoke out through his nostrils and nearly swooning with the smell of carrion, he kept staring at those violated bodies, perhaps seeking truths or secrets in their insect-ravaged faces. Buzzards were walking around, spreading their darkened wings, tearing at bits of flesh that had sloughed off the corpses, their scaly heads glistening with corpse-slime and

grave-waste. Crows were cawing, perched on shoulders, picking away at holes in faces, digging untouched eyeballs from hollow-vaulted sockets.

It was too much.

Slaughter turned away…or tried to. But the best he could manage was a slow-shuffling backward gait.

He found he could not think clearly any longer.

Forcing himself to stand still so he did not fall down, making himself drag cool and easy off the cigarette in his fingers, he felt the sun above, felt it burning on the back of his neck and tossing his own shadow at his feet as the innumerable dead things about him continued to swell and green and cry tears of subterranean slime. He felt at that moment, as he listened to the buzz of flies and the popping mucid sounds the corpses made, that he had never been quite so exhausted in his life.

That's when he heard someone humming.

Humming.

It was insane, but he heard it. It filled him with a strange, dreamlike sense of terror. He dropped his cigarette, which tasted like death anyway, and pulled the Combat Mag.

Humming? No, they were *singing.*

And Slaughter could hear the song very clearly. A childhood ditty he had long forgotten about:

"The hearse goes by, the hearse goes by.
"No one laughs when the hearse goes by…"

He looked across the host of impaled corpses but it wasn't them, of course. It was coming from the other side. He moved around the edge of the green, beneath the shadows of the impaled and saw a naked man crouching there. An old man who looked much like a living corpse himself. He was on his knees, facing Slaughter, swaying his head from side to side as he sang his dirge:

"They wrap you up in a bloody sheet, and bury you under six feet deep.
"They put you in a big black box, and cover you up with dirt and rocks.
"And all goes well for about a week, and then the coffin begins to leak…"

Slaughter went over to him cautiously.

The old man looked at him. He had no eyes. The skin had been peeled from his face and there was only a red-crusted deathmask there now. Though he had no eyes with which to see, he looked right at Slaughter and sang,

"The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle on your snout.

"They eat your eyes, they eat your nose, they eat the jelly between your toes…"

A madman. Some crazy old coot who had been tortured yet had escaped the fate of the others. Slaughter stood over him wondering if he was too far gone.

The old man stopped singing and said, "You, oh it's *you.* I *knew* you'd be coming and I waited for it because my last hour was growing long and *he* said there would be no death for me. Not until you came."

Slaughter had a lot of questions, but all he said was, "What in the hell happened here? Who did this to you?"

The old man laughed uncontrollably and it was a hideous sight with no skin and no lips…just that peeled anatomy, the yellow teeth jutting from the gums. When he stopped laughing he started singing again:

"Your stomach turns a slimy green,
"And pus pours out like whipping cream.
"You go all mushy like dampened bread,
"And that's how the worms eat you when you are dead…"

"Stop it," Slaughter told him. He'd had enough and he wasn't in the mood for any grade school graveyard poetry. He was barely holding himself together by that point and he intended on having answers one way or another. The old man had been badly used and was out of his head from it, but that didn't mean he would go easy on him if it came to that.

Because right about then all that fear and weird terror had built up in him and broke open like a boil and he was feeling dirt mean. He was feeling capable of just about anything if he didn't get what he wanted.

“I’m going to ask you again: What happened here and who in the fuck did this?” he said.

The muscles of the old man’s face hitched up into something like a grin. “*He* came in the dead of night,” the old man said. “There was a hot wind blowing, the hot plague wind of the Hellmouth blowing strong. And I knew. I knew *he* would be coming. I think we all knew *he* would be coming. *He* was dressed in black. All in black, you see? Death *must* be dressed in black. *He* looked like a preacher with them duds and that wide-brimmed black hat. *He* carried no bible, stranger, only the Book of Hell in one hand and a branding iron in the other. *He* wore black boots that clumped along as *he* walked. You should have seen his face…white as marble, scarred and pitted and flaking, them eyes like pink frog spawn, staring, never blinking, just staring and showing you things and making you think things that you wanted to forget. *He* said we were named in his book, every last one of us and that’s when everyone went on the stakes. I hid. I didn’t see it. But I heard ‘em screaming, oh yes, I heard the screaming of the dying and those that wished they were dead. But I was a coward and I hid and then *he* sought me out and did this to me, told me I would not know death…not until a stranger came and you *are* that stranger and, praise glory, I go to the good earth now and the mercy of my God…”

“Who?” Slaughter heard himself ask. *“Who was this man?”*

But the old man just shook his head as if he dared not say. “*He* was Death. *He* was Death. *He* showed me the death-in-life. *He* had holes in his face and *he* pulled worms out of them holes. Crawling worms. *He* pulled one out and dropped it on a corpse and the worm crawled in and the corpse was alive. That was my choice. I was to be like them, the dead that walk… or I could wait for you. I made my choice.”

“Who was he?”

“Him.”

“Tell me.”

The old man began humming and Slaughter realized it was some sort of Sunday school hymn he’d probably learned as a child. He was crazy. His mind had been laid bare…yet, Slaughter knew that what he was saying was essentially true. It was Black Hat. It could be no other.

“His name,” Slaughter said. “Tell me.”

“I asked him…I sure did…I asked him…”

“And?”

The old man began to shake. *"He* smiled at me and black blood came from his mouth in gouts. And *he* said…*he* said… *'Nemesis…I am Nemesis.'* That's what *he* said and I knew him by other names as you shall know him…"

Then the old man fell over, going face-first into the grass. He shuddered and died. Slaughter stared down at him, hearing the carrion birds feeding and cawing and hissing. The old man said *Nemesis* carried a branding iron and there could be no doubt of that because he had used it on him. For burned into the old man's back was:

It made no sense.

It covered nearly his entire back and was seared black to a depth of half an inch into the flesh there. Some kind of stylized word and accompanying symbol that looked cabalistic and mystical and made Slaughter tremble. He told himself it made no sense and yet it made all the sense in the world if he could only figure out what it all meant. The altar. The sacrifice of the people of Victoria. Black Hat who carried a branding iron and the Book of Hell (as the old man called it). Black Hat who called himself Nemesis who, Slaughter knew, had been a Greek goddess of revenge and divine retribution but was sometimes referred to as the Christian devil himself.

Was that what this was about?

The Devil?

The fucking Devil?

Slaughter could not be sure. It seemed both a possibility and a complete absurdity. Too simple. Too pat. Maybe Black Hat was not the devil, but if he wasn't then he was surely something like that.

"All right," Slaughter heard his own voice say. "Enough. Now get on out."

He jumped on the hardtail and blew on out of Victoria until he was eating pavement again and the wind was fresh and the sun was warm and

that awful fetid stink was blown off him and the defiled atmosphere of the town was out of his head.

Chapter Eighteen

Slaughter took it slow in granny gear, trying to think and afraid to think at the same time. He thought about his brothers, the Disciples. They were probably worried sick about him by this point and he hoped they wouldn't do anything rash like trying to take on the Red Hand on his behalf. But Apache Dan would be running the show and he was nothing if not a cool head. And as Slaughter thought about these things he wondered what in the Christ he had gotten them into here because this whole fucking thing was getting more complex by the moment, like a great jigsaw puzzle with thousands of pieces. It would come together, he knew, sooner or later and maybe that's what he feared the most.

You had the urge to go west, man, he thought as rode along. *And that brought you into conflict with the Red Hand and got Dirty Mary killed and got the Disciples out of prison which bought Irish a grave on the side of the road. Your brother's life hangs in the balance and you still have that strong death hard-on for Coffin and Reptile of the Cannibal Corpse crew but it's become so much more than all that now. Something very big. Something very important. Only you don't know what because you're too damn stupid to make sense of the senseless.*

He moved on down the road, thinking he should probably turn back and see if he could retrace his route back out to the I, but that would mean cutting through Victoria again and he didn't know if he was up to that. So he did what 1%ers did when things got bad and things got rough: he grabbed hold of the ape hangers and opened up the throttle and let the wind sort it out for him.

About an hour after he left Victoria, he saw a finger of smoke in the sky.

He slowed to a stop and contemplated the significance of it. It could mean a Red Hand camp or some other crazies, or it could have been some citizens having a wienie roast. Could have been a lot of things.

“Fuck it,” he said under his breath. “Let’s find out.”

At worst he’d do some killing or go down dead and at best he might get some directions back to the I.

He followed the pavement through the trees until he was so close to that plume of smoke he could smell the burning wood. A dirt road led up into the hills and at its end was where the fire would be. He pulled in and followed it until the trees parted and he saw a simple plank cabin with a pickup truck parked before it. An old guy in a red-and-black checked lumberjack shirt was feeding hickory chips into a firepit. He had a long white ponytail and looked to be an Indian with his seamed brown face and that unreadable look in his gray eyes. He paid absolutely no attention to the hog rolling in or Slaughter stepping off the bike.

His only interest was the fire and the joint of meat roasting above the licking flames on a spit. It was his world and it truly seemed that he knew no other. Slaughter stood there. Waiting. Wanting to speak but not allowing himself to, as if it would be a bad thing to break the old man’s concentration. The smell of the meat was tantalizing. No, more than that… for the breeze was flavored by it. It carried the succulent, juicy smell of smoked meat and it practically owned Slaughter at that moment, reminding him of the terrible hollow in his belly. He could not remember ever being so hungry before. He felt giddy with it. Absolutely giddy, like one of those characters in an old cartoon that are so hungry that the odor of food becomes a physical presence, one that taps them on the shoulder and draws them in.

Slaughter went over to him, figuring it was time.

“Sit,” the old Indian said. “Might as well.”

Slaughter sat on a stump and watched his host.

“Name’s Frank,” the guy said. “Frank Feathers.”

“John Slaughter.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Same here.”

Slaughter lit a cigarette, mainly because he had to push the odor of the meat out of his head before he passed right out. He was hungry, starving, yet there was a special smell to this meat…honey and hickory, brown sugar and mesquite…a special blend that made him feel ravenous.

You feel like you been drugged. Ain’t that funny? Maybe the old guy’s working magic on you.

The Indian had still not looked at him. He was stirring the ashes in the pit with such careful concentration it was almost like it held some religious significance for him.

“You hungry?”

“I could eat,” Slaughter told him.

“I like it when a man tells the truth, son.”

Slaughter smiled. “I’m starving.”

Feathers nodded. “Better. I was worrying I’d lost my touch there.”

It was then that Slaughter noticed there were two tin plates and two blue-speckled coffee cups with attendant silverware sitting on a little table near the old man’s elbow. There were little cloth bags of dry spices there. A carving knife. A couple of corked bottles of dark fluids.

“Can’t help noticing, man,” Slaughter said, “that you have two plates and two cups like you were expecting someone.”

“I was.”

“I don’t wanna be cutting in. I just need directions.”

The Indian stared into the fire. He poked the coals. “You ain’t cutting in, son. I was expecting someone and here you are.” He took a pinch of green spice from one of the bags and let it drift over the meat. Then he nodded, sniffing, began to slowly turn the crank of the spit. “I’m glad it was you and not another.”

Slaughter raised an eyebrow. “There’s dangerous people out there.”

“Some of ‘em ain’t people.”

“Some are and they’re just as bad.”

Feathers nodded. “Sure. But some are worse than others.”

Slaughter thought that over, had the curious feeling that the old guy was trying to tell him something without actually telling him. So he took a chance: “You ever come across a man in black? He carries a branding iron, wears a black hat.”

Feathers grunted. “You came through Victoria.” Not a question; a statement.

“You know that?”

“I figured that.”

“The man I spoke of came through there and did some terrible things, man. I mean some real bad things.”

“I know. Death follows him.”

“Have you seen him?”

“Not lately.” Feathers shrugged. “Not lately.”

Riddles? Slaughter decided he was in no position to be demanding. Not yet. He’d play this cool because that seemed to be the only way *to* play it. “What tribe you with?”

“Spirit Lake Sioux.” He looked at the tattoos on Slaughter’s arms, the club vest. “How about you?”

“Devil’s Disciples, out of Pittsburgh.”

He nodded. “I imagine that sort of tribal affiliation is very demanding.”

“It is. Yours?”

“Not so much. I’ve never been much on my tribe. Hate to say it and my ancestors will probably kick my ass in the afterlife…but it’s true. I suppose I should have delved more into the culture and history of my people but I was like most people: I was lazy.” He shrugged. “But, boy, when the casinos opened up, that didn’t stop me from taking my cut. Lot of us who didn’t give a damn about tribal affairs suddenly transformed into full-blooded Sioux warriors. Money will do that to you.”

“Sure.”

“Once I had ten million dollars in the bank.”

Slaughter laughed. “Bullshit.”

“You’re right: it is bullshit. How about this one then: I had three wives who were beautiful. They were all twenty-one years old and smoking hot.”

“Bullshit.”

The old man nodded. “How right you are. I had one wife, though. Mary Jean. She was a white woman and in the words of my father, meaner than snake piss. But I loved her. She reminded me of my mother.”

“Now I believe that one.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Feathers said. “How about this: There was a time when I was known as the Barbecue King of the Dakotas.”

Slaughter let the smell of that meat enter his head. “I can believe that one.”

“Right you are. It’s true. I had three restaurants. They were called Smokin’ Frank’s. I seeded them with my casino money and made a killing. I was a wizard with a good side of pork back then or a brisket of beef. I made my own sauces and rubs. My ribs won blue ribbons eight years running. Then the worms fell from the sky and I had to close up shop.”

The smell of that meat was still in Slaughter’s head. There was an art form being practiced here, one that was part smoke and part spice and pure

alchemy.

“This is antelope,” Feathers said. “Pronghorn. Took him two days ago on the Sheyenne. Hard to get beef these days...pronghorn’ll work.”

“Tell me about the man in the black hat,” Slaughter said then, just coming out with it.

“What makes you think I know?”

“You do.”

The old man almost smiled. “You white people always think Indians are wellsprings of darkest mystery. Some of us are. Most of us aren’t. A few of us just happen to be real good with barbecue.”

Slaughter did smile. “And a few of you are real evasive.”

“Not on an empty belly, son.”

Feathers took up his carving knife and cut a slab of meat for Slaughter, then another for himself. When Slaughter asked if he needed some dipping sauce Frank told him it would only mask the pure wonder of the meat itself. He was right. The pronghorn, made in the Barbecue King’s inimitable style with secret rubs and slow-smoking, was unbelievable. It was tender and sweet with a little zing of spices that made your tongue stand up and take notice as you chewed.

Slaughter could only say, “This is good. I mean, this is really good.”

“Of course it is.”

They ate in silence and the meat was so very tasty that the idea of talking during the eating of it would have been close to sacrilege. At first, Slaughter wolfed it…then he slowed down, savoring the rich juices, the smoky flavor, the hickory/brown sugar sweetness and the bite of mesquite. Three slabs later, he was breathless and almost dizzy with the wonder of it, full and satisfied and glowing warm. It was the feeling one got after making love to a very beautiful woman…only, somehow, it was taken up a few notches.

“You like?”

Slaughter just smiled. “There’s like and there’s love and then there’s pure infatuation, man.”

Feathers nodded. He understood. He knew his craft and he knew it well. “How about you lend me one of those cigarettes, son, and let me tell you a story now that you’re full and sleepy and feeling no pain?”

Slaughter gave him one.

The old guy snapped off the filter, lit it with a burning stick. “The man in black,” he said. “I seen him more than once. Long before the worms started

falling and the cemeteries vomited up their dead, I saw him when I was a child. I saw him as an adult. I spoke to him and I watched him make with his black magic…”

Chapter Nineteen

“What I tell you happened when I was a boy,” the old man said, “and in those days the Spirit Lake Reservation was a place of the most awful poverty and desperation. There were several villages on the reservation—Crow Hill, Wood Lake, Fort Totten, a few others—but the one we lived in was called Crabeater Creek. It’s not there anymore. It burned to the ground one night and was never rebuilt. I suppose that’s what I want to tell you about…”

Crabeater Creek was nothing but a collection of houses that were so very ramshackle they weren’t even houses, they were more like shacks. This was long before the days of the casinos and the easy money they pumped into the rez. There was little to no medical care, and what there was of it was doled out by a white doctor in Fort Totten named Dr. Beak who sampled liberally from his own pharmacy and was only working the reservation because he cut a deal with the feds that kept him out of federal prison on charges of narcotics trafficking. Something which, obviously, would have cost him his license to practice anywhere but Mexico or Calcutta. How men like Beak get their licenses in the first place is one of the eternal mysteries of this life, like why God made little green apples or why fat women wear tight pants.

We had no running water, precious little food, rampant disease outbreaks, and a sort of communal curse that was the drink. My father was a kind man and a good man, but when he drank—which was whenever he could—he became a violent drunk that beat other men, beat my mother, and beat my brothers and I. In the end, the booze beat *him.* It beat him hard and beat him silly and when it was done there was nothing left. Not that any of this should come as a surprise to you or anyone else. The reservation was an awful place in those days. In the summers we subsisted on handouts and whatever we could hunt up in the woods and hills and in the winter, well,

we crowded around woodstoves and prayed for spring while we watched each other get thinner as the snow fell and babies died of the croup and the flu each morning. The men drank. The woman mourned. We kids just stayed out of the way.

Anyway, you ask of this fellow in black. Well, first I ever heard of him was when Skip Darling lost his mind one long dead white winter. He took up an axe and chopped up his wife and three children. It was in the middle of a blizzard. When the tribal police got there, he had their remains stacked up tidy as cordwood and he was sitting in his rocker by the stove with the bloody axe in his hand. Jim Fastwind, who was my best friend, had an uncle who was with the tribal police. And he told us all about it by the fire one night. He said Skip's eyes were like black holes leading down into a darkness you did not want to know about. When they questioned him, he said a man in a black hat had told him to do it. Was he an Indian? they asked. No sir, he was white. His face was bleached white and his eyes were like pink quartz. He carried a book with him. He showed it to Skip. In it were written the names of Skip's wife and children. That's why they had to die. Skip said his name was in the book, too. Two days later, Skip hung himself in jail.

That was one incident. Here's another. My sister Darlene had a thing for cats and she begged and pleaded with my mother for one until she finally got her way. Darlene was a cute little shit with huge chocolate brown eyes that would melt you. No one could say no to her, least of all my mother. So Darlene got her kitten and she loved that thing to death. Then one night, winter again, my mother was tending to a neighbor's sick child and my father was off drinking. Darlene began to scream and we charged into her room and it took us a long time to calm her down. But by then we already saw what had unnerved her: the kitten was dead on the floor, drowned in a pool of its own blood and innards. It looked like it had been stepped upon. *Hard.* But Darlene said a skeleton man in black came into her room and he was a white man with "funny eyes" and that he picked up her kitten and squeezed it until the guts came out of its mouth. Then he laughed and said that one night soon, he was coming back to do the same to her.

Now, let me tell you about Shayla Hawk, our teacher at the mission school. A full-blooded Sioux, she was beautiful beyond belief. Her skin was copper, her hair long and black, her eyes just this side of midnight. Absolutely breathtaking. That same winter, the winter of the worst blizzard

in memory, she did not come into town from her little cabin on the Creek. The tribal police, again, went in there. Shayla was quite dead. She had been taken apart, anatomized I guess you might say. Her head had been tied by the hair to the beams above along with her legs and arms and entrails. Her torso was nailed to the wall. They found her heart, tongue, and stomach in a stewpot. There was blood everywhere, of course. A single setting had been placed out on the table with cooked portions of her anatomy upon a plate. It had been partially eaten and a mug filled with her blood had been drained. A very grisly discovery, you might say. But what seemed worse is that whoever slaughtered her, whoever dressed her out like a deer, calmly sat there, eating her as her organs boiled on the stove and her remains dripped from the rafters above.

That's a horror story, isn't it?

But it's true. There was a rumor that the only evidence was a single handprint burned into the wall. Months later, Jim Fastwind and I snuck up there and had ourselves a look. Even then, the stink was still evident—sour, gamey, heavy in the air. But we saw the handprint burned into the log wall nearly an inch by our reckoning. Not the hand of a monster but a very human hand, except the fingers were easily ten or eleven inches in length.

Well, now you're getting a taste of life on the reservation in those days, aren't you? It wasn't all bad, surely, but when the man in black started showing up—and when he did, people died or went mad—things became considerably worse. By then, of course, he was called the *Skeleton Man* when he was mentioned at all…because that's how Darlene described him. Like a skeleton in a black suit. So thin he could slide under a door which, she claimed, was how he entered her room that night.

Regardless, the reasonable thinking people of the tribe decided that this boogeyman was nothing but a campfire story, a folktale, what have you. Something that years later might have been referred to as an urban legend. Yet, when things happened now and again there was always some skein of bullshit concerning the Skeleton Man. But the tribal police said it was nonsense and people concurred…at least publicly. Privately, they kept a close eye on their children. For maybe the light of reason will chase away the shadows, but sooner or later that light will go out and the shadows will come skittering back.

One dog-hot August night of the year as I lay in my bed, my father was sitting on a willow stump out in the yard doing his drinking. I heard him

talking to someone. I looked out there and there was a man with him. A tall, thin almost emaciated man dressed in black. In the moonlight I could see his face and it was like white cheese. His eyes were like topaz. And his mouth—oh, how I remember that mouth—grinning huge like if it opened much more it would swallow the world.

My father said something and this man in black, the Skeleton Man, said, “We’ll walk together, hand in hand. To a place you’ve never seen and no man may yet know.”

I wanted to cry out to my father not to go with him, not to listen to what he said…but I was terrified. I was so afraid I was shaking. As they started walking side by side I noticed that the Skeleton Man cast no shadow in the moonlight. I opened my mouth to scream. That’s when the man in black put those pink jellyfish eyes on me and I swear to you it felt like a thousand spiders crept up my spine. I could not speak. I could not move. Maybe it was what they call a hysterical paralysis, but maybe it was a little something more. I lapsed into a fever that lasted over a week and I only vaguely remember Dr. Beak hovering over me smelling of disinfectants and five-dollar rye whiskey.

And my father? We never saw him again. But a few years later when a particularly dark tract of woods we kids called Lonesome Thicket got flattened by a rogue tornado, bones were found. A complete set of white shining bones in the very top branches of a thirty-foot oak. I won’t attempt to explain that, but I believe I knew who the bones belonged to.

But now I backtrack. For on the morning of the night I saw my father walk off with the Skeleton Man, something happened. A 1969 Plymouth Roadrunner rolled into Crabeater Creek. The Roadrunner had been cruising the Spirit Lake Reservation most of the morning and people had noticed it, of course it. It would pull up before someone’s house, the big meat-eating 426 Hemi under the hood purring like a big cat with an empty belly, then it would drive off. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason. Every time the tribal police showed to investigate, the car was gone and there was only some crazy story of a long, sleek machine painted flat black that looked like a shark out of a nightmare, something fast and lethal that swam the roads of the rez, its sparkling chrome grill like jaws waiting to open for a sacrifice of flesh and blood.

But the Roadrunner took no sacrifice.

It slowly cruised the high roads and dirt tracks, getting familiar with Crabeater Creek particularly for reasons only known to the man behind the wheel. Who was that man? You may well ask and I may well tell you. But for now, don't ask me how it is I know these things. Just listen.

The man's name was Chaney, though he had been known in other places as Royer and Smith and Bowers. He had been known by a lot of names in a lot of places. But that day, at the end of a hot dead August, he was Chaney. Had you seen him walking down the street, tall and proud and juiced to the gills on hard, acid-eating attitude, you would have crossed the street to get out of his way. For it was within him and without, that simmering evil, something physical yet impossibly…nebulous. Something savage and empty and raw-boned. I had a teacher at the mission school who said that iniquity in its purest form has a certain attraction, but there was nothing remotely attractive about Chaney. His eyes were soft and pink and juicy like the bowels of a hog. He was a skeleton wrapped in skin. His face was the color of a new moon, pocked with holes and drawn by scars.

So Chaney was indeed the Skeleton Man. He pulled up in front of a deserted house on Grassy Hill just across the creek and sat behind the wheel of that death-black Roadrunner. He did not move. He did not fidget and he did not blink his eyes, he only stared and hummed a morose tune under his breath. Just waiting, forever waiting. That house on Grassy Hill had once belonged to an Indian agent named Summers and had been sitting empty since Mathew Lake had hung himself from the chandelier three years earlier.

Several dozen people had seen the Roadrunner that morning and the strange thing was that, though they saw the actual physical incarnation of the car, their minds assured them that what they had seen was not a 1960's muscle car with a flat and lusterless paintjob, but a black hearse. An old Cadillac hearse straight out of the 1950's, glossy and dark and somehow ghostly, even in the early hours of that sunny, fine day. The sight of it disturbed them in ways they could not—or did not want to—understand. It made something turn bad inside them, made voices whisper in their heads and their bellies turn over in a slow unpleasant roll. They saw it pass and felt the spit dry up in their mouths, smelled impossible things like black graveyard dirt and rotting flowers. But what bothered them most was that, although the sunlight came down bright and sure, the car cast no shadow that they could see. This was something they would tell themselves later

that they had imagined, but when the nightmares of that hearse haunted their bones at three in the morning, they would know better.

Only one man, far as I can tell, talked with Chaney that morning and that was Albert Smith. But Albert was a drunk and nobody paid much mind to anything he said. Albert claimed to have stepped out of an alley in Crabeater Creek and there was Chaney the Skeleton Man. Albert described him as looking like “a loose, slithering weave of shadows.”

Albert was terrified and particularly because there was not another soul around. Just him and the Skeleton Man. He claimed he went down to his knees and begged that his life be spared. But the Skeleton Man was disinterested. He stared down the street with his pink eyes and said, “*This village appeals to me. Each time I come here I enjoy it. How ready is it for the reaping, the harvesting. Too many dark places tucked away in too many hearts. Too many secrets under the surface and too many closets filled with bones. I bid you good day, sir. Tomorrow I will be back and you will wait for me.”*

So, far as I can tell, Albert was the only one that day that spoke with Chaney the Skeleton Man and lived to tell the story.

Anyway, Chaney was at the house on Grassy Hill. He stepped out of the Roadrunner, lit a filterless cigarette with a finger that burned sulfur-hot like a matchhead and waited. As he told Albert, he liked Crabeater Creek. He had been there before and he liked its lines and curves, the smell and taste of it. Like a seductive and exotic woman, he was anxious to put his hands and mouth on it, to run his tongue over its hot, perfumed flesh.

But that would be later.

For now, Chaney was content just to be there. He pulled a briefcase from the backseat and, whistling like a man on his way to work, he moved through the gate and up the flagstone path to the vacant two-story frame house with an apple tree in full bloom out front. He plucked a FOR SALE sign out of the overgrown yard and went up the steps and in.

Inside, there was silence and echoes. A darkness that clung too readily beneath stairs and behind half-shut doors. His face pale and his eyes shining, Chaney looked around, seeing that there was no furniture to be had save a card table and a folding chair.

A car door slammed outside and Lona Whitebird, the local reservation real estate agent, came through the door smiling brightly even though she did not like this man called Chaney. For reasons she did not fully

understand, he reminded her of the snake house at the Chicago Zoo. There was that same coiling vitality to him, that vague musky, reptilian odor that seemed to waft off him. But he had the proper paperwork, proving he was an enrolled member of the Spirit Lake Sioux, so she could not deny him even though she was certain he was no Indian. She was, in the back of her crowding little mind, not even sure he was a *man.*

“Well, Mr. Chaney,” she said. “I see you’ve taken down the sign. I think that means you’ve made a decision.”

“I have,” he said.

“And?”

“This will do nicely.” He nodded his head, but did not smile. “I will make a fine and secret work here.”

Lona did not know what he meant by that and was not sure she wanted to. Chaney was always saying things like that, she discovered in their earlier meeting when he inquired of the house, things loaded with innuendo that you did not dare question. There was a concrete ambiance to him, an appetite she did not like. He reminded her of something stark and cold like a slaughterhouse. When she looked at him she could only think of winds blown through October cemeteries. His eyes did not emote, they were dead things waiting to be filled with something. His face was the color of bone, a pallid canvas of scar-tissue set with draws and hollows that coveted shadow.

Nothing good could come of a man like Chaney, she thought.

And she was right. For he was just a gnawed shell, an empty drum of giggling darkness and scratching midnight. He was no more human than a bag of cobras.

“Well, then,” Lona said. “I guess we have some papers to sign.”

She sat at the card table and opened a folder of documents. Chaney stood behind her and she could feel his shadow that was cold and blank. His own briefcase was open and she could see it held nothing but a hammer and a bag of long nails.

“All set to do some home improvement, I see.”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Oh yes.”

She turned to look at him, smelling his breath which was like thawing meat, and seeing that he was grinning. His teeth were long and overlapping like those of a crocodile. He had something in his hand. A six-inch blade sprung from it.

He handed it to her and although she shook her head, she took it in her hand and immediately began to shake and tremble.

“Use it,” he said. “There’s a good girl. Let us sign the pact.”

Still shaking her head, Lona sank the knife into her own throat. She fell to the floor, bleeding and moaning, trying to crawl for the door. She left a bloody trail behind her and died with her fingers gripping the knob. Whistling, Chaney took up his hammer and put a few nails in his mouth like carpenter. Then he lifted Lona up and nailed her to the wall, crucifying her. A nail in each wrist and one through each ankle. Then another through her throat just because it pleased him to do so.

He stared at her corpse for some time, knowing that a simple act of expiation was what was needed to get the ball rolling.

Wiping blood from his hands, he sat down at the table, humming, listening to the continual dripping of Lona’s corpse.

“And that is all I know about the man called Chaney. *How* I know you’ll soon learn. All I can say is that I learned it the same way you’ll learn answers to your own questions. Now, as I said, I was down with a violent fever for a week. More than a week…then, one hot night, I woke up with the most awful feeling of being watched. Of being stared at. I felt those eyes boring into me and nobody could convince me different. I remember being terrified, being filled with an irrational terror of the unknown only a child can truly know. So, despite the fear, I got up and went to the window. I saw a man standing in the road below. He was staring up at me. To this day I remember him only too well. He was the man in black, the Skeleton Man, and I knew this without question—a tall, narrow man, skeletal and grinning like a skull. He stood in the moonlight and he cast no shadow.

He beckoned to me and I felt rivers of cool-hot sweat course down my face. I shook and trembled. I tried to call out to someone but it was like my lips were sewn shut. What made it worse—if it *could* have been worse—was that I had been dreaming about him in my delirium. Ever since he walked off with my father and threw that look at me, drove me down into that rank pit of fevers, he had been in my dreams. Infesting them, you might say. The image of him had been growing in my head like a dark seed planted in the soil of my soul. I had not known this, not until afterwards, but it had been there, that face, that expression, that personality slowly eclipsing my own, growing in my head until it filled my skull, casting who I was into a pool of shadow from which it would never escape.

I finally managed to cry out.

But no one came to my rescue because there was no one left, you see. I cried out and down there, in the road, the Skeleton Man faded away. The last thing to go was the face. It was like a bright full moon burned into my retinas and I could see nothing else. Just that face. A face of darkness and light, a phosphorescent complexion that was pitted and sinister, teeth long and narrow and impossibly white. And eyes…oh yes, those eyes…those pink, pink eyes like glistening roe. Long after the face had faded, those eyes remained, shining and discarnate.

Though I was still pretty loopy from the fever, I made myself stand up straight. I made myself breathe in deep. I forced air into my lungs, oxygenating my blood, pushing the shadows out of my brain so I could see clearly, because I knew then that clarity had never been so important. I went to the door and that's when I heard the first scream. It was quick and shrieking. Then there was another and another and another. All of them were quick. They left me reeling. I counted six of them and I knew they were the screams of my four brothers, my mother, and my sister Darlene.

I made myself go down the stairs.

I felt something behind me. Something following me. Even before I got downstairs I could smell the death: it was hot and meaty. It was a slaughterhouse down there. The floor was slick with fluids and entrails, the air tasted almost salty with fresh blood. I think I slipped on it and fell or maybe I blacked out for a few seconds. But when I opened my eyes I was laying right beneath them: the carcasses of my family. They were hanging upside down, nailed to the rafters above by the feet. Each of them had been opened crotch to throat and what had been inside was slopped over the floor. Their eyes were plucked out, their tongues yanked free, their throats cut, and as a final…depravity, the edges of their mouths had been slit upwards giving them each a bright red clownish grin.

They were dead.

My family had been butchered.

And into their backs a word had been branded. I think you know what word it is if you've been through Victoria so I won't tell you even if I could read it.

Darlene, poor sweet little Darlene. She was on the floor by me, squeezed like her kitten…her guts steaming from her mouth.

Anyway, I could not scream. I had no air in my lungs. All that came out was a whistling expulsion of black air. And it was then that I became aware of a funny smell, a sharp stink like ozone that cut through the stench of death all around me: not subtle but searing and overpowering. Something in the corner by the woodstove shifted, rustled. A shadow rose like a balloon filling itself with air. There was someone there, some*thing* there. It was no optical illusion, a form was taking shape, something born of shadows, born of darkness. It filled out and I saw a man. He was dressed in black and his face was pale as moonlight, the complexion craggy and drawn. The eyes were pink and bright like pockets of pus.

"How fare you, little boy?" he said. "Does thee fare well?"

I wanted to leap at him and tear him into pieces but I knew I never could because he was a ghost. He had no more true solidity than mist. But I was young and hot-blooded so I jumped to my feet and ran at him. Even the pungent stink of open graves and corpse slime that came off him did not stop me. I went at him, swinging and clawing and he was like black smoke. My fists went right through him and he laughed at me until I fell at his feet, panting and sobbing and wailing.

"The little injun that could," he said in that voice of whispering casket silk. "What spirit, what gumption, what guile." He laughed again, then held out his hand to me. "Take it boy. Take what is offered." The hand was like white rubber, shiny like wet neoprene. The fingers were white and slender and almost delicate. There were no nails at the ends of the fingers but thorny yellow claws. Flies were crawling over the back of the hand. "Take it, Little Injun, whilst I have patience. Your sister took it."

I looked up at him and I knew I was dead. I knew he'd roast my soul in hell and cook my brains on a hot dog fork over the hottest fire in the nether regions, but I did not believe what he said. I had decided that he was the Devil or perhaps Death, or perhaps the very thing that had inspired those stories. Trembling and sobbing, I just looked up at him and hated with everything I had. "YOU LIE!" I told him "YOU ARE NOTHING BUT LIES!"

And he laughed. Oh, how he laughed. But you have never heard such laughter, my friend. There was no joy or mirth in it. It was the sound of agony and cruel suffering, starvation and suicide, scraping blackness and minds imploding with raw insanity. "Little Injun! How dare you speaketh unto thou! But I do not lie, my little red heathen, my little wagon-burner,

my quaint little red savage: Darlene took it. She begged for it and I took her. Before I opened her, I raped her and she died screaming, begging for more! Oh, how she twisted, how she writhed, how she foamed with blood and squealed a fine hellsong, plump squealing piggy!"

I shouted something at him and he roared with laughter again. I covered my ears because I would not listen and he grinned and it was the grin of something dead pulled from a lake. I felt things in my ears. Crawling things biting my hands, so I pulled them away and they were red with blood from the bites of hundreds of spiders that were pouring from my ears…black widows, I think. Black, round, shiny bodies, skittering needle legs.

"When I speak, you will listen. My words you will hear…do you understand, Little Injun?"

"NO!" I cried.

"Then let's spin another tale. If you won't listen I'll crawl inside your head. Would you like that? Would you like me to live in your skull and scream at you all day long and on through the night?" He saw that the idea of such a thing scared me and knew without a doubt that he had my undivided attention. "Your mother, the poor squaw. Hadn't she suffered enough? Hadn't she begged gods both black and white, pagan and Christian and wholly indifferent for a few crusts of bread? For food for the mouths of her children and clothes for their backs? Yes, Little Injun, she had. But being a squaw she was born to suffer for the word *squaw* is but French trapper slang for *cunt.* Did you know that, Little Injun? Now you do. For the hole of woman is the mouth of hell and the vanity that spawns Armageddon." He lowered himself down until his face was six inches from my own and I could smell the hot, cremating stench of his breath which was carrion in moldering boxes and sewers clogged with black filth, excrement, tomatoes rotting black and babies swollen blue. "I took special pains with your mother. I had to rape her, Little Injun. For she was guilty of bringing you squalling little redskin brats into the world in the first place. So she had to be punished for that seething hungry hole of hers, sucking life and spewing babes…and as God is my witness—for he must be, mustn't he?—I punished her and jabbed my frozen member into her until she screamed, until black arterial blood ran from her mouth, until she knew the torments of the damned and she renounced her false gods and swore allegiance to me. And then, and only then, did I let her take me in her mouth where I

gave her a squirt of something that turned her tongue to pulp and burned a hole in her throat." He laughed again and it sounded like babies flayed.

"Now take my hand, you squirming grub," he ordered me.

And I almost did. But when I looked again there was no hand and there was no Skeleton Man. Just the sound of his laughter and two glowing pink eyes shrinking into the shadows where they winked out like dying stars.

I ran outside into the night.

I knocked on door after door after door, but there was no answer so I stopped knocking and invited myself in and in house after house after house it was the same: carcasses hanging upside down, slit open, gouged and rent, feet nailed to beams above. In the house of my friend Jim Fastwind, the corpses were moving. They were swaying back and forth like they were dancing to some sort of rhythm. Their mouths were opening and closing and they were all saying the same thing: *my name*. It was the Skeleton Man and I knew it was the Skeleton Man. He had done this. All of it.

Then he was beside me again. He didn't ask for my hand, he *took* it. His hand was so cold it burned my own. He dragged me outside and across the way, into the house of Macey Flowers who'd just had a baby. Macey and her father were hanging upside down, of course, saying things to me in the voice of my mother. But I would not listen. It was blasphemy and I would not listen.

In the back bedroom, Macey's baby boy was squirming beneath a dirty blanket, bawling for his mother whose love he'd never know again. I looked down at the child, afraid of what I might see, but it was only a tear-streaked face red with exertion and frustration and fear.

"Let's play a game, Little Injun."

I just stared at the child. I wanted to pick it up, hold it against me and make it feel better, but the Skeleton Man would not allow it and I knew it. When I tried to move, my arms were rubber. Dead, senseless limbs.

The Skeleton Man held a deck of tarot cards in his hand and they were well-worn. I remember that much. "We'll cut for the little porker, shall we? A gentleman's wager for I am a gentleman and you with your heathen red blood must surely understand pride."

My hand was working suddenly and I drew a card from the deck without even thinking about what it was I was doing. The card I drew was the Fool and the card the Skeleton Man drew was Death. "Ha! You've lost, Little Injun! For Death trumps all!"

I wanted to run, but he wouldn't let me. He made me watch what he did then. "Death, so sayeth the Lord of Graveyards!" He pointed a finger at the baby and it no longer moved. Its eyes were wide and glazed, drool running from its pink blossom of a mouth. Then it began to go green, it bloated up like it was filling with gas and then it made a sound like violent farting and maggots poured from it in squirming rivers.

"Do you favor the hand of Death, Little Injun?"

But I could not speak. It was only the will of the Skeleton Man that kept me standing, kept my eyes open.

"Tut," he said. "I see that you do not." Then he dug the nails of his left thumb and forefinger into one of the holes in his white face and pulled out a wriggling red worm. A resurrection worm of the sort that would fall from the sky much later on. It came out with a sound like a thread pulled through a button hole. He dropped it onto the dead baby and it swam into the foaming white sea of maggots. "Born again, so sayeth the Maker and Unmaker, breathe my plump little chavy, smile out at us from the charnel!"

The baby moved. It reached out its gas-distended fingers at me, making a crying, hungry sound as graveworms fountained from its mouth. "Hold it, Little Injun. Pick it up and love it. Press the sweet baby against your cheek. Breathe warmth into the little grub. But beware, I say, of its sharp little milk teeth."

But I could not touch it and he did not make me. It wasn't mercy; it was amusement. He pointed his finger at the baby and it seized up. "Back to the earth, sayeth my voice!" The baby not only seized up, but blackened and fell into itself with a crackling sound like melted plastic or dry cellophane. Then it burst open, cracking apart like an egg and there was nothing but maggots inside, shining and white, then a blackness of oily carrion beetles.

"As I did unto your family, I have done unto that squalling brat," the Skeleton Man said to me with a whispering, windy voice. "And as I have done unto them so I have done unto the village of the Crabeater and certainly to Shayla Hawk who I made beg for death before I gutted her like a fish."

I screamed and ran out of there, tripping down the stairs and crawling through the grass and that's when I saw the town was burning. The fire was racing up the road and house after house went up in flames. I ran with the heat at my back and made it outside Crabeater Creek, winded and seared and blackened with smoke, but I made it. I watched the town burn flat.

They said a propane leak had started it all. Bullshit, of course. But nobody dug any deeper into it and that was that. I ended up in the mission school and some years later I became a tribal cop after I got out of the Army. Some twenty years after the inferno that took Crabeater Creek, I was out on patrol. In Crow Hill one afternoon, I saw the car: that black car, the *Roadrunner.*

I told myself it wasn't so as you would tell yourself it wasn't so.

But I knew it was the one, that same flat black monster with tinted windows that had crawled from the sixties. I slowed and saw there was a man leaning up against it. He waved. He was dressed in black. That white face. Those awful eyes. It was Chaney. It was the Skeleton Man. Again, I told myself it wasn't so as I pulled the patrol car up behind that Road Runner. But something had already gone bad inside me, something went cold and my guts pulled down deep.

I had a mad desire to stomp on the accelerator and drive off, run while I still could but instead I pulled to a stop and grabbed the riot gun, clicked the safety off.

I stepped out, my belly filled with poison now. "Who the hell are you, Slick?"

The man in black just grinned and his teeth were long and narrow like those of something that fed on dead things. He was tall and thin. All over his white hands were names, dozens and dozens of names written in tiny, flowing letters.

"I said, what's your name?"

"Chaney," he said. "Chaney. Just like last time, Little Injun. How fare you, my heathen savage?"

There was an accent to his voice but I couldn't place it. He had an accent in Crabeater Creek that night, too. It sounded European, I thought. Regardless, in Crow Hill that day the voice was raspy and raw like he had been gargling with powdered glass. His face was skullish, set with lots of hollows and draws, the lips thin as a paper cut, the flesh nothing but poorly mended scar tissue like he had used lye as a facial scrub sometime in the past. But it was the eyes lording over all this that found and held me…they were flesh-pink, bubblegum pink, and glossy, completely without whites. The eyes of an unborn reptile.

"Long has it been since we met, Little Injun."

“Shut your mouth,” I said. “Tell me who you are and where you are from.”

He laughed. “I think you know who I am and perhaps what I am. But I enjoy games. So let us play, you and I. Now, you know I’m not from these parts. I just come and go like a…well, like a bad storm or a disease wind. I do my thing, as it were, I sow and reap, and then I just push on. My name is Chaney. At least today it is. I plan on causing trouble tonight and having a bit of a lark. How’s that set with you, Little Injun? About the time this village wakes from its nightmare and comes to its senses, I’ll be on my way. Another dark story for another dark and rainy night, hmm?”

I had no spit in my mouth. My throat had constricted down to a pinhole and I was having trouble breathing. When I got my voice out, it was broken and airless: “Okay, Mr. Chaney, okay. I’ve had about enough of your shit for one day. You wanna blow smoke up somebody’s ass, it won’t be mine. Now, why don’t you turn around and put your hands flat on the hood of the car there. Assume the position, because I figure you know it.”

The Skeleton Man started laughing…at least laughter came out of his mouth. It never touched the rest of his face, though. That was still hard and cruel and hideous. The laughter was high and scraping and almost hysterical. “Now, you know you can’t put the cuffs on me, Little Injun. You damn well know you can’t any more than you can draw down the moon and put it in your back pocket or knit yourself a set of breeches from the fog that comes in off the river. Shall we be sensible? Shall we sit like old friends and talk of Crabeater Creek?”

The sweat was rolling down my face. There was a smell coming off Chaney and it reminded me of things long buried that had been exhumed. “Who the hell are you?”

Chaney the Skeleton Man lit a cigarette, only no flame ever touched it… it just flared up. Smoke rolled from his nostrils. “I’m Chaney. Already told you that. Oh, tomorrow I might be Smith or Blake or Lupez or Snarnov, but right now I’m Chaney. Fair enough, Little Injun?”

I could feel the shotgun in my hands, feel my finger putting pressure on the trigger. “What’re you doing here?”

“You already know why I’m here. I’m Chaney and I’ve come to do some business, that’s all. Next week, next month it’ll be a different town and a different name.”

Chaney stepped forward and I put the shotgun on him, had every intention of killing him. I had dreamed of doing it for many years. Only I couldn't seem to pull the trigger. And Chaney knew that. He grinned, his pink eyes filled with motion like ripples in a fleshy pond.

"Now, Little Injun. Look what I have here. Look what is in mine hand."

It was a book. One of those huge antique books, a folio like the *Gutenberg Bible*. A massive leather-bound tome thicker than a Manhattan phonebook. It was well-worn, the iron hasp rusting. I knew what it was: *The Book of Hell.* This is where the names of the dead were written, the names of the souls the Skeleton Man reaped. He cracked it open and held it out to me. The pages fluttered in the breeze. About two-thirds of the way through the book they stopped and my eyes locked on a single page. There were the names. The names of all the families that had been exterminated in Crabeater Creek written in a spidery precise hand using a faded brown ink that looked like old blood. I saw the names of Jim Fastwind and his family. Shayla Hawk. Skip Darling, his wife, and children. Lona Whitebird. They were all there, as were the names of my mother and father, my brothers and my kid sister. My name was there, too. In fact, it had been underlined three times.

By this time, the Skeleton Man's grin was immense and ghoulish, an autopsy grin, a leering death rictus of long white teeth, the grin of a hungry corpse. His breath was like hot sulfur. "Now we understand each other, Little Injun, do we not?"

I was sweating and shaking, something inside my head, maybe my free will, melting and going to taffy. "Don't you move or I swear to God I'll kill you!" I was still pretending things were not what I knew them to be. Chaney was just some perp, some low-life criminal scum and me, Sergeant Frank Feathers, why I was going to run him in and put him behind bars. That's how much I was deluding myself. But it was fear, friend. I was negotiating from a position of fear. "Put your hands up or I'll kill you! *I swear to God I will!"*

"God has nothing to do with this," said Chaney, still grinning. The Cheshire Cat? Certainly. But maybe more like the Cheshire Cat after starving a week in a grave and then showing up scratching at Alice's window after midnight, grave-dirt falling from his whiskers, that horrible appetite on full display in the form of a toothy charnel grin. "And you will

not kill me because I cannot be killed. I, who am the cosmic lord of death! I, the dark lord of gallows and graveyards, gibbets and—”

“SHUT UP!” I screamed at him. “SHUT THE FUCK UP WITH THAT FILTH! I DON’T WANT TO HEAR ANY MORE OF YOUR DIRTY ROTTEN FUCKING FILTH! YOU PESTILENCE! YOU SORE! YOU CANCER!”

I brought the riot gun up at that moment, my hands shaking wildly as I tried to jerk the trigger. But it was no good, simply no good. I did not have the strength or the will. Tears began to roll down my cheeks and I saw in Chaney’s face the images of my mother and father, my brothers and little sister, Jim Fastwind and Shayla Hawk and the lunatic giggling face of Skip Darling.

“I know all about you, Frank Feathers,” said the Skeleton Man.

“You don’t!”

“Ah, Little Injun, but I do. Your daddy was Jim and your mother was Clarice. I knew them well, as did I your brothers and your sister Darlene because I gutted them and I nailed them to the ceiling, did I not? I danced in the moonlight wearing the bowels of your baby sister! I chewed her from cunt to throat! Yummy, yummy, hot in my tummy!” He laughed with a sound like breaking glass. “But I know more, much more! You had a kid brother that went stillborn in the womb. When you were seven years old you got bit by a spider and contracted blood poisoning and nearly died. You had another sister named Amanda that was run down by a car when you were but five years old. You played baseball and you got your first handjob from a squaw named Leslie when you were thirteen. You were in the Army and you knocked up a girl in Germany, only you never did meet your son. What a shame. And not six years back your wife died of cancer. Now wasn’t that a sad business? She was in a coma for two weeks beforehand and when she finally came out of it, she was so doped up on morphine she thought you were her Aunt Maurine. Remember, Little Injun? Remember how you held her hand when they shut her life support off? The digital displays slowly dropping as she passed into death? The way her hand felt small and greasy in your own like the flesh of a mushroom and how you cried as she passed from this life and—”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

The Skeleton Man just laughed, laughed with that same high and hysterical sound, just beside himself and quite possibly out of his mind.

And at that moment, I was not sure about anything. Not sure if this was even happening or that, if it was, if Chaney was even a man. Yes, he had two arms and two legs, one head, all the standard equipment, but there was something terribly off about him. He was like some cardboard cut-out, something one-dimensional lacking any true depth or substance. Not really a human being as such, but the reflection of one, a shade, a grim caricature of a man. I had the disquieting notion that if Chaney turned sideways, he would cease to exist altogether. That if I was able to actually pull the trigger of the riot gun, Chaney would not die from the blast, would not even be wounded…he would simply dissipate like a cloud of smoke, atoms scattered, waiting to be organized into Chaney the Skeleton Man all over again.

I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping Chaney would not be there when I opened them. But he was. He was there, all right, and he was no longer smiling. He was just staring with those pink, steaming eyes. “Put the gun in your mouth, Little Injun,” he said.

I tried to jerk the trigger again, but it was no good. Something was inside my head, something dark and diabolic, something eating my mind up one bite at a time and there wasn’t a goddamn thing I could do but feel my willpower being shredded and ingested. I was just a passenger, a marionette waiting to be worked.

“Do as you are told, Little Injun.”

So I did. I slid that oily, black-tasting barrel into my mouth and as much as the idea was abhorrent to who and what I was, I saw escape. I saw a way out. I saw release from the clutches of the thing that held me and that release was pure, it was sweet to taste. I frantically tried to pull the trigger but my fingers were no good, they would not obey.

“Soon enough, Little Injun, soon enough.”

The riot gun fell from my hands and clattered into the street. I was defeated and fatigued. I was drained. I was broken. I noticed then what so many had noticed before: that the Skeleton Man cast no shadow. Not that that bit of information was any real surprise: things like him never cast shadows.

Something released me at that moment and I ran.

I ran out of pure animal fear. I ran through fields and thickets, I splashed through streams, I struggled in the mud of bogs…and all the while, the Skeleton Man followed. He did not walk or run, he drifted six inches off the

ground, telling me how he had killed my family and speaking in their voices and telling me how, when the time came, I would die, too.

Then he was gone and I was alone, sore and scratched from twigs scraping my face, my uniform filthy with dirt and pond mud and pickers. I think I made up some crazy story about chasing some guy, something the other cops could understand, and it was that night I found something in my pocket, something *he* had given me.

Chapter Twenty

“And what was that?” Slaughter asked him.

Feathers poked the fire with his stick. He took another cigarette from Slaughter and snapped off the filter, lit it, blew smoke from his nose. He reached into the pocket of his shirt and pulled out a card. A tarot card. It was The Devil. On his throne, Satan sat with bat’s wings outstretched, one hairy arm lifted as if in greeting. The card was well-worn, greasy, yellowing.

Slaughter reached out to take it from him, but Feathers pulled it away, shaking his head. “No, I don’t think you should touch it, son. I think it carries a black juju of sorts on it.”

“A curse?”

Feathers shrugged. “Something like that. Something intended for me and only for me. I don’t think you need any of this *bad* rubbing off on you. Maybe there’s no power in this thing but I believe that there is. It’s from the Skeleton Man’s pack and when he comes to collect it, he’ll collect me, too.”

A fetish object. Slaughter had heard of such things. A juju could be both good luck or bad luck, and in this case it was definitely the latter. Like some kind of engraved invitation that would carry Feathers through the gates of Hell.

“But you still haven’t told me how you knew those things,” Slaughter said. “How you knew his name was Chaney or what happened in that house. How did you know those things?”

“I told you I knew ‘em same way you’ll know ‘em.”

“And how’s that?”

“By going on a vision quest.”

Slaughter just looked at him. The story Feathers had just told was weird, gruesome, and more than a little unnerving, but he wasn’t sure if he believed it or not. Feathers seemed to be honest and his words had a ring of

truth to them…but a vision quest? That was mysticism and Slaughter had very little patience with things mystical and unseen, things divinatory and spiritual. He was by nature an existential kind of guy that believed in what he could see and touch and know to be true through his five senses. Other than that…he was skeptical. Yet, Black Hat had showed himself in that video at the compound and he had crept into Slaughter's dreams. Maybe that didn't mean much, maybe there was nothing truly flesh-and-blood about any of that, but Slaughter had a nasty feeling about it all.

"And how do I go on a vision quest?"

Feathers smiled. He put the tarot card back in his pocket. From the other pocket he took out a little packet of tinfoil and unwrapped it. Inside, there were three little dried slices of cactus about the size of coins. Peyote buttons. Slaughter had seen them before. He had tripped his brains out on the stuff once and was discovered naked in a field the next day.

"Buttons? The bad seed?"

"Sure, it's the only way."

"Go on a trip?"

"See your destiny."

Slaughter smiled, thinking about it. Black Hat aside, he was out here to get that bio out of the fortress and maybe kick some Cannibal Corpse ass in the process. This was business. He was on a mission and he needed to hook back up with the Disciples. Did he really want to go scrambling his brains at this point? The answer to that was *no*, obviously, but as he looked into Frank Feathers' eyes he saw something in them—an integrity, a complete honesty, a certainty that was nearly mystical in and of itself. Slaughter could plainly see that the man wasn't playing with him. He really believed a trip on the button express could unlock secrets and unveil mysteries, open doors of perception long closed and provide an acuity, a bird's eye view of things, that would be forever denied him unless he let the peyote wake up his sleeping brain and notch his mind up to complete consciousness.

Look at him, man. He's got his finger on the pulse of something bigger than the both of you. Maybe it's because he's an Indian but more likely because he's had commerce and interaction with old Black Hat and maybe some of that supernatural mojo rubbed off on him like gold dust.

Slaughter took the button and chewed it up, filling his mouth with cool spring water from the mug Feathers gave him. The button tasted like shit

like they always tasted like shit. He worked it into a mush in his mouth, swallowing the sacred juice in droplets.

“You’re on your way, friend,” Feathers said, patting his arm. “Wish I could go with you. Wish we could travel together. I think we’d do well together, you and I. But it’s not to be. Tonight, tomorrow night, I’m going to have a visitor and he’s going to want the card I hold in my pocket.”

“Sure.”

“You’d best be on your way.”

Slaughter understood. Where he was going now was not for the old man to follow. His trail was his own and the lights he saw and the shadows that moved there were of an intimate variety. Frank Feathers had his own upcoming trip to contend with and he needed time alone to come to grips with his god (or the lack of one).

Slaughter hopped on the hardtail and waved to him and Frank Feathers waved back, both knowing they’d never see each other again. At least not on this side of the pale. Slaughter followed the dirt road out to the pavement and opened up the hog until he could really feel the wind biting into him. He rode like that for maybe twenty minutes until he felt a weird anxiety taking hold of him. He wasn’t making the turns in the road so good anymore. He was sweating. He was shaking. A town appeared before him and a green sign said: EXODUS, pop. 1200. He pulled in and followed deserted streets, getting tangled up in a weird snaking labyrinth that was partly physical but mostly in his head. He parked his scoot at a little grassy park and stepped off, falling face first into the grass which was so vividly green it seemed to reach up to him, every blade a separate finger of hallucinogenic color. The smell of it was intoxicating. He pulled himself to his knees, grounded by waves of intense nausea. He vomited but had no temporal memory of it, thinking it had happened many hours before except that the bile on his chin was wet, so very wet. It smelled like a freshly-cut lawn.

He stood uneasily, sweating rivers.

Before it went too far, he grabbed his road bag off the scoot which contained the Combat Mag and extra speed loaders and his *Kukri*. It was important to have these things with him, he decided. In his mind they were totemic. He stepped through the vibrant green grass, making for a peeling bench bordering a monument. The earth felt squishy beneath his boots. He

was aware of the blades of grass crushing beneath his step, the sound they made. It was almost like they were crying out in pain.

The bench.

He fell into it.

And went for a ride…

* * *

He was shivering in the sun and sweating hot rivers, his limbs feeling numb and his mouth oddly dry. The sky above was so brilliantly blue that it was like neon. The monument was a great slab of stone that seemed to rise higher before him like a monolith. It sparkled like silica. He was getting off good and he seemed to know it without actually knowing anything but the whisper of the wind and the clarity of all things like his eyes were truly open for the first time in his life.

"What was that Indian's name?" he heard his voice ask. "Did he have a name?"

He put his hands to his ears because his voice was loud and booming and he could see the sound waves moving through the air like ripples in a pond, picking up speed, flying off towards the hazy mountains in the distance and then rolling back at him, each individual wave hitting him like breakers and making him cry out. The words were turned around and pulled inside out and they echoed around him, hitting him from all sides.

"THAT…"

What?

"DID HE?"

Stop it!

"NAME WAS THAT…"

He was shaking now, begging for it to stop.

"INDIAN DID HE WHAT WAS…"

"Auuughhhh," he moaned and shook with dry heaves.

"NAME HAVE WHAT WAS…"

"Shut up," he managed.

"DID NAME HAVE HE INDIIIIIAAAAAN…"

Breathing in and out now, he remembered that a long time ago he heard echoes in a dream and maybe it wasn't a dream at all and where the hell was he and where had the other Disciples gone? He could feel them near,

his brain replaying bits of conversation from years past that sounded new and recent.

He felt heights of exhilaration and lows of terror, everything in-between. He tried to speak but his mouth would not work. His hands felt numb and he flexed his fingers but was afraid to look at them because he feared they would be gone. Everything was disjointed and unreal and in its unreality had a weight and a physical presence beyond anything he had known before. The tangible was intangible and the unknown all-too apparent. With altered perception, he could not be sure how long he had been in the park or how close or far away objects were.

He looked at the trees in the park and wondered how their limbs moved with no breeze and wondered why all the houses in those tight little neighborhoods flanking the park had suddenly become tombstones that were gray and chipped and flecked with lichen. Or had they always been like that? A squirrel raced by his boot and Slaughter was certain it had been laughing at him. He saw a bee. A big fat bumblebee. It hovered in the air before him and Slaughter was thinking how bright were the yellow bands encircling its body. He could see its eyes and the careful smirk on its little bee mouth and the wings, moving so fast they buzzed…but if he concentrated, they moved very, very slow and then he was aware of how many hairs the bee had. Black hairs. Yellow hairs. Bulging sacs of pollen on its legs that looked to be the size of fanny packs. When the bee moved, it left a trail of pollen behind it that shimmered like golden fairy dust.

“Pay attention now,” said the bee and flew off.

Hey, asshole.

Slaughter looked around, not sure of anything now but knowing from experience that nothing was real and everything was real and you couldn’t fight it: you just went with it.

Hey, asshole.

He looked and Dirty Mary was squatting in the grass before him. She looked good. He felt a burning need in his groin. He wanted to get up and climb on top of her but he could not move.

Oh, aren’t you just something? Fucking asshole motherfucking biker piece of shit. Who do you think you are? Spent your life robbing and fighting and murdering and dealing drugs. Nothing but a criminal. A lowlife criminal and now…ha, ha…now you think you’re righteous, you’re walking

the straight and narrow, on a holy mission. Don't make me laugh. Did you think Black Hat won't punch your ticket in the end?

You know Black Hat?

I serve at his side.

But you're dead.

She laughed and unbuttoned her blouse and showed him her breasts. They were full and round, the nipples pink and jutting. He saw the tattoos on them—the roses on the left one and the dragon on the right climbing up to her sternum.

You can't have them. He won't let you.

Who?

You know. Call his name. To call the names of the dead is to summon them and to give voice to the darkness is to make it real. You get it, asshole? Do you GET IT?

She squeezed and worked her breasts in her long fingers, teasing the nipples until they stood as hard as push pins. When she took her hands away there was another tattoo and it covered both breasts:

Slaughter began to shake and shiver as the hot sweat of fevers broke open on his face. That word. That symbol. That word-symbol. It meant something and he knew it. It meant the most awful things and Dirty Mary was trying to tell him but he couldn't hear and she kept shaking her head as she rubbed her breasts.

I died. Then I went down the rabbit hole and into the darkness and I saw him there. He asked about you, John. Oh, the evil that men do. You're one of his favorites because you have absolutely no respect for human life. You like to kill.

No, I don't.

But you do.

Only when I have to.

She began speaking in what seemed dozens of voices at the same time, all of them berating him and shouting at him and telling him things he needed to know, but were incomprehensible.

Really, John. You have to concentrate. I went down the rabbit hole and I met the Mad Hatter and he said tweedle-dee, tweedle-dee, why is a raven like a writing desk and right now he's with that Little Injun and he's telling him riddles.

Shut up.

I won't. Not until you remember.

Then Slaughter did. In his memory that was so real it shut out everything else he saw a couple of the boys from the 158 Crew: Sean Cady and Butch Vituro. They were both long dead now but that didn't seem to matter and why should it?

Allentown. Yes, Allentown, PA. The 158ers were going after a witness in a drug trial involving Ringo Searles, then-president of the Pittsburgh chapter of the Disciples. The rat's name was Boyle, a drug dealer who had fingered Ringo's complicity in a tri-state heroin trafficking operation.

In under a minute Sean popped the lock on the back door with a little L-wrench and a shot of graphite. They found themselves in a kitchen that stank of fried foods and garbage. It was dark, but Slaughter could see light in the next room, hear the TV blaring out the canned laughter of a sitcom. He moved noiselessly in there, saw Boyle in an easy chair, his back to him. Cady moved forward, cool as a body in a freezer, his eye on the top of Boyle's pink head. He got right up behind him and brought the butt of his Glock right down on the crown of Boyle's skull. It made a meaty thud and Boyle fell forward, sliding from the chair.

Cady turned him over with his boot. Boyle was out cold.

Satisfied, Cady went to the window. There was a shade drawn. He pulled it up and down twice. Then he went back to Boyle. A lolling human slug, Boyle spilled out of the bathrobe in too many places. Fat bulged out of the robe like an inner tube from a tire.

Butch came in with the tools.

"Okay?" he said.

Cady nodded. "Just fine." He turned to Slaughter. "Now you see how we joint 'em."

Butch set down the leather sack of tools. Next to it, Slaughter set out a stack of black, heavy-duty plastic garbage bags.

“Never take off your gloves,” Cady said, his eyes narrow in his square-jawed face…except it wasn’t Sean Cady now. It was Black Hat who was the Mad Hatter who was Chaney the Skeleton Man. The clownwhite face, horribly pitted and scarred as if by acid, the eyes like pink mince. He wore a high top hat and on it was a placard with the following:

“Dat’s rule one,” he said, imitating the voice of a tough hood. “When ya do a guy, ya always cover yer tracks. Ya take yer gloves off fa one minute, rub yer eye, scratch yer balls, whatever, dere’s dat much more chance yer gonna touch something. Ya leave a print behind, fuggetaboudit. Dey’ll get ya. Dey always do.” He looked at Slaughter, winked. “Dost thou comprehend this, biker boy?”

Butch nodded. “That’s right, Johnny. This here’s messy work, but if you do it right, nobody ever has to know.”

He gave each of them a blue plastic disposable apron, the sort meat cutters wore. The Mad Hatter took out his Glock again, threaded a silencer on the end. He left the room, turned on some more lights. “In here. Come along with me,” he called out. “Tweedledum and Tweedledee.”

“Sure,” Butch said.

Slaughter took the bags, the tool bundle.

Butch took Boyle by the legs and dragged him effortlessly down the hall into the bathroom, hefted him into the tub. The Mad Hatter stripped the shower curtain free, tested the strength of the rod, nodded with satisfaction that it was steel and it was screwed firmly into the wall.

“We’ll make a fine and secret work here,” said he.

Slaughter and Butch slid a plastic bag over Boyle’s head. He moaned and stirred slightly. The Mad Hatter went over to him, stuck the muzzle of the Glock up to the bulge of his head and pulled the trigger—pop, pop, pop—as he whistled Gounod’s “Funeral March on the Death of a Marionette” which was impossible to hear, Slaughter knew, without conjuring up images

of Alfred Hitchcock. Boyle trembled and went still. The bag was essential, Butch pointed out, in that it helped to contain the bone chips and brain matter that otherwise would've sprayed around the room.

Butch took Boyle by the legs, hoisted him up, lifted him up so the top of his bagged head just brushed the bottom of the tub. The Mad Hatter, whistling merrily, tied his ankles together with rope, then roped him to the shower curtain rod. The rod bent down, but held. Already blood was running from the bag around Boyle's head. The Mad Hatter pulled it free, set it aside.

When Slaughter stared at him he said in a singsong voice:

"There was a lady all skin and bone,
Sure such a lady was never known:
It happened upon a certain day,
This lady went to church to pray…"

The Mad Hatter took out a carving knife. He slit Boyle's throat and the blood really started to run. "This will drain our pig a lot faster," he said. "About five, ten minutes and we can commence work on him."

Butch and the Mad Hatter lit cigarettes, chatted about the weather, all the rain they'd been getting.

Slaughter felt a greasy, heaving sludge crawl up his throat. Felt his mouth go hot, wet, and sweet. He pushed past the Hatter and Butch, vomiting into the toilet with great shaking spasms until there was nothing left and he was just coughing and gagging and spitting.

Butch patted him on the shoulder. "It's always tough the first time," he said. "You'll be okay. Now your cherry is popped. Ain't that right, Sean?"

The Mad Hatter laughed and then sang:

"On looking up, on looking down,
She saw a dead man on the ground;
And from his nose unto his chin,
The worms crawled out, the worms crawled in."

Butch and the Hatter tossed their cigarettes into the toilet, flushed them, along with what Slaughter had deposited in there.

What came next was even worse.

Butch, who was now Dirty Mary with jiggling bared breasts, untied the tool bundle and rolled it out flat. In little pockets there were meat cleavers, butcher knives, steak knives, medical instruments, hammers, hacksaws, bone snips. He/she told Slaughter to strip off Boyle's bathrobe.

It wasn't hard with him hung up like that, but to do so he had to come in close proximity with the corpse. He pulled one arm out, then another. The robe dropped. He reached down to retrieve it, needing badly to be sick again, and one of Boyle's tangling arms brushed his face. The feel of the flesh was cool and moist. It was almost too much. He pulled out the bathrobe and bagged it.

The Mad Hatter cut the ropes and Boyle fell into the tub, the bag coming off his head. His skull had pretty much come apart now. Plates of bone with tufts of hair sprouting from them were connected only by gristle. The tub was red with blood. The Hatter turned on the faucet, splashed some water around, helped clean it up a bit.

"Okay," he said. "Tweedledee."

Dirty Mary took a cleaver and started chopping through Boyle's left ankle. Did so, and set the foot aside. The Mad Hatter took the hacksaw and, lining up his cut with the gash made by the knife, started sawing through the neck. As he sawed he said, "Don't worry, John. We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

Slaughter stood there with a butcher knife in his hand. His face was bloodless, his legs like putty.

"Grab a wing," Dirty Mary laughed. "Plenty for everyone."

The Mad Hatter was watching him now through the slits of his pink eyes. Slaughter did not look at those eyes, not for long, because whenever he did they began to run like pink tallow, flowing from the puckered sockets in rivers of pink slime.

Licking his sticky lips, Slaughter sucked in a breath, took one of Boyle's hands and started cutting through the wrist. His guts throbbed in his throat and an itching madness tickled at his brain. Like cutting through a chicken leg, except it was so very fleshy.

"You have trouble with the bones and cartilage, asshole, use the bone snips," Dirty Mary instructed, working Boyle's left leg free. The pale globes of her tattooed breasts were speckled red. "Just cut and twist his hand. It'll pop."

“Now you know,” said the Mad Hatter, “why a raven is like a writing-desk.”

When Slaughter came out of that he was still in the park, crawling madly in ever-widening circles as his brain told him to just go with it, just ride it out because in its unreality was its very reality. Dirty Mary was his oracle that had become mixed up with the 158 Crew and a book from his childhood. He knew better than to reason it out. He knew that something was coming, whether revelation or stark insanity or perhaps both, he could not know.

You make everything so difficult, John.

Dirty Mary again, fondling herself.

You make no sense, he told her.

I make all the sense in the world. Pay attention now: why is a raven like a writing-desk? C’mon, John, answer the riddle. If you don’t I’ll toss you down the rabbit hole.

Slaughter’s mind was very clear and sharpened, it turned back upon itself, seeking and probing, opening doors that had long been closed. It looked in the dusty back corridors of his brain, found something. A place. Like some wellspring of childhood terrors opening before him and he knew it was where Black Hat had come from.

A city.

It was a city.

Yes, a city of the dead and the damned, those unliving and those undead and those that were never really born. A blasted urban gutter of nightmare.

The city was a shrouded, evil place of cyclopean buildings and crumbling streets that were mazes leading everywhere and nowhere. There were rivers and stagnant pools of refuse and broken bodies. The shadows had textures, physical presence; colors had odors; the ground heaved tears and flame; the sky rained blood and filth. There were great empty spaces, blackened and blasted, dismembered bodies spread in every direction as if some terrible battle had taken place there. The lanes were flanked with crucified children and adults impaled on stakes and set aflame. The flickering illumination intended to guide strangers to valleys of punishment they were better off not seeing. And everywhere, the hot, nauseating stench of cremated flesh and the cries of the damned.

It was Hell.

Maybe not literally, but something very much like Hell.

And this is where his tripping brain had dumped him, marooned him: the city with no name.

There was no time here or no sense of the same. Slaughter ran through black mists, from one street to the next, feeling something behind him. Something or someone. Always following. Footsteps coming through the darkness, slow and methodical and stalking. They were patient and relentless. No matter how far he ran, they only edged in closer and closer. Now and again, he'd see a face peering from the shadows. The face of Black Hat. Always watching, always waiting.

Slaughter kept running, passing through the rotting thoroughfares of the deserted city, looking for somewhere to hide or someone with warm blood in their veins to help him. But there was nothing and nobody. Just the breath of ghosts and the whisper of shadows.

So he stopped, a wild and raging voice in his brain asking: why the hell are you running anyway? This is what you came to see.

That was true.

Now nothing was following him. He stood there in a black wind of gritty crematorium ash and bone dust, thinking, trying to make sense of it all and knowing it was senseless but maybe not entirely.

This is the place you found when you went down the rabbit hole, he understood. This was it. A killing ground, or maybe the place where killing was born, the epicenter of violent death. Yes, that was it. That made perfect sense to his tripping/soaring mind.

He looked around.

He knew this was a place to fear. But he had not come here to be afraid, he had to learn, to, to know.

"Knowledge is the razor that slits your throat," a voice said.

Slaughter turned and there was Black Hat, his white face almost luminous, his dead salmon eyes bright. "John Slaughter," he said. "My favored son. What dealings we have had through the years! What heights we reached together! But our work is not yet done. Listen: there was once a king who killed indiscriminately. He had himself a wife, did this king. She was low and crude, a slatternly Judy was she. The king grew tired of her so he stuffed her like a tripe with bushels, pecks, and pipkins of loathing, falsehood, steaming servings of excrement. When his fatted calf was quite full, near to bursting, he offered her up to the soldiers of a dark kingdom, mercenaries and throat-slitters, gut-stabbers and belly-eaters, seed-spillers

and blood hands. They ate of her and found her pleasing. The king, at any time, could have saved his fair wench, she of the hungry holes, his whore-bride fishwife, his vixen ogress. But he found amusement in her undoing and laughed did he as the soldiers filled themselves with her. Only at her moment of greatest defilement and violation did he step in and take the lives of the soldiers. But then it was too late, kind sir: for the clay, once cold, was not to be molded by mortal hands and the skein, once unwound, was not to be threaded by guilty fingers. Eh? Do you see, John?"

"You're talking about Dirty Mary. How I could have saved her."

"Excellent! There is meat between yon ears, not just dull gray sludge but pink dreaming meat!" said Black Hat. "Perhaps there was a parable in that story after all. I cannot tell you the how of the why and the how of the how but I can show you the ending of the game, the scene upon which the final curtain draws…"

Slaughter blinked and before him stretched an endless bone field where the skeletal remains of men, women, and children were intermixed with the bones of animals and rubble and refuse as if an immense graveyard had vomited up its dead and a city had been shattered to dust and fragments. Yes, an ossuary. An urban graveyard. He saw a few blackened buildings standing in the distance but everything else was rubble and bones and a blowing dust of desertion and a choking charnel smoke boiling into the sky.

Through the haze there was a face above that nightmare cityscape, a face that was the sun but darkest orange giving over to blood-red. A grinning skull-face which was the face of Black Hat the Skeleton Man smirking with satisfaction over the heaped and bird-picked death far below, happy, happy, happy was he. The face faded into the haze but the grin, like that of the storied cat, remained toothsome and smiling.

"That is the ending, favored son," said Black Hat who was only a grin of teeth himself now. "It's up to you to fill in the rest."

When Slaughter again came out of it, he was sitting on the bench. He was breathing, damp with sweat, knowing he had been shown something and knowing that it would never make complete sense to him. Was that post-apocalyptic glimpse he'd been given something he needed to stop from happening or would it happen regardless? And why was it all channeled through his guilt of Dirty Mary, his childhood love—and fear—of a certain children's book, and his tenure as a member of the dreaded 158 Crew?

The trip was slowing now, coming down to earth, yet the buzz was still owning him, just beginning to release its grip. There was a cigarette in his hand and he smoked it and tried to think, but his head was like a colander and his thoughts were liquid that spilled through the holes. All that remained was gunk and shit, like the stuff caught in a lint trap—guilt, self-doubt, self-recrimination, self-loathing, despair, and melancholy. All the very things that were snares that would trip him up, baggage that would slow him down, shovels that would dig his grave.

He blinked, and somehow the cigarette had burned between his fingers or maybe he had smoked it. As he came down he began to feel how sore his body was, his joints stiff and aching, and he wondered, truly, why he had done it in the first place. Did he really expect revelation from a drug? All he had, in the end, were more questions and half-thoughts, muddled suspicions, and vague apprehensions.

He sighed and stood up.

Time was not disjointed now, it was slow and smooth and orderly. The buzz was fading to a mild exhilaration. Despite the soreness, he felt good, he felt solid and real and grounded. His eyes only saw this world.

And as they saw it, they also saw the occupants of this world: the living dead. For all around him were zombies, twenty or thirty of them at least.

Chapter Twenty-One

How long they had been watching him, he did not know.

He couldn't say that they were necessarily amused but they did seem almost curious. Twenty or thirty had been his rough guesstimation but that was certainly wrong because there were more now and they were pushing in from every quarter. The stink of them was their symbol of office and it was nauseating and maggoty. They stood about while clouds of meatflies rose and descended, feeding and planting eggs and ensuring the cycle of vermin. The dead cared not. Faces that were bleached and pouchy, raw-boned and oozing, held eyes that were flat black and dull red and pus-yellow and sometimes they held no eyes at all. Here were old men and women, wrinkled and naked in dry flaking skins like yellowed parchment or faded, discolored silk. They were crones and reapers and eye-biters with exaggerated skulls and tousled hair like white straw. With them stood men and women from youth to middle age with bloodgreased faces and bodies cankered with sores and gaping ulcers. Some of the women were obviously pregnant or blown-up with gas…but no, their swollen bellies moved with oily gyrations as the children turned within their wombs. Little ones stood with them, boys and girls, some in moldered burial suits and dresses, most simply naked. They were small and hunched and elfin, some skinless and others wearing borrowed hides and still others appearing as if they had been turned inside-out.

Slaughter knew what this going to be.

He felt it coming off them with the hot corpse-gas that blew out from their orifices and innumerable lacerations: the need to kill. Not just to take life but to feed, to stuff themselves. The majority were already doing that—stuffing themselves with any available carrion whether it came from their own putrescent bodies or goodies yanked or clawed from those standing near them. And that was almost ritual with them, he knew: the stuffing, the

filling, the instinctive need to shove meat into their mouths and chew it, crush it to pulp, swallow it and feed again with voracious gluttony until they fell to the earth to *become* food. The worms inside them demanded it.

As they watched him, he watched them.

He found his pack on the ground and made ready. He strapped on the holster with the Combat Mag and the sheath with the Gurkha knife in it. He stuffed three extra speed loaders into the ammo pouch on the holster. He was thinking that if he could draw them away, out into the town itself and lose them in the streets he might make his way back to his scoot and ride out.

The dead began to move.

At least, half a dozen of them did: children. They were so unspeakably filthy with grave-dirt and corpse-drainage and the festering ordure of what they had been feeding upon, it was hard to tell if they were boys or girls and in the final analysis, it really did not matter. They grinned at him with faces like pocked membranous sheaths and liquid putrefaction. One of them was certainly a little girl that looked oddly like a Raggedy Ann doll with her stitched red grin and bulging black glass eyes, a gray watery discharge running from the holes in her face. The others to either side were like walking bone sculptures or cages of animated bones lightly fleshed in leathery pelts. One of them had an almost ritualistic pattern of sewing needles jutting from her face and what that could mean he did not know.

He began to move.

Their numbers were thinnest off to the right so this is where he went, moving casually, suppressing the desire to whistle, knowing he was in incredible danger but refusing to give in to fear. That was mostly the aftereffects of the peyote, that singular sense of indestructibility and joyous exhilaration at being alive.

They had not grouped to stop him.

But just as he got close to his opening and was already notching up his muscles for a wild run, a woman stepped out to stop him. She wore a finely-tailored business suit…at least it had been until the mildew started growing all over it. When he got within spitting distance, she hiked her skirt up so he could see the ruin of her sex. It looked like a Venus Fly-Trap, spiked and hungry. He brought up the Combat Mag and shot her in the head, the slug making a clean entrance by splitting her septum lengthwise. Although most of her brains and skull were ejected out with the back of her head, she took

three or four drunken steps and then vomited out a black, gushing curd of corpse-chum that splattered at his feet before she tipped straight over face-first into the grass. The others covered her like locusts, stuffing themselves and Slaughter charged through their lines, casting three or four aside and blowing the head off another.

Then something looped around his throat and he brought his elbow back and felt it sink into flesh gone to mush and the dead man that had taken hold of him stumbled back.

Three more ringed him in.

But his hand was practiced and sure. The Combat Mag barked and they all went down with perfect headshots. He spun and drilled another, but his aim was off and the slug went into another's throat. And that was six rounds and he knew it.

No time to reload.

He holstered the .357 and slid the *Kukri* out.

They screamed and converged and he went straight into their numbers with the Gurkha knife slashing back and forth in lethal arcs, severing limbs and opening guts and splitting open faces. He kept hacking and cutting as they fell and others surged over the top of their comrades and he stumbled through their masses, tripping on entrails and fluids, splashed with their drainage and foul gouts of blood.

Stumbling, tripping, Slaughter hopped forward, fell again, rolled free and came up running.

Breaking free momentarily he ran out of the park and saw there was no way in hell he could make it to the hog. He dashed towards a row of storefronts, gasping as he tried doorknob after doorknob and the dead poured in at him from every direction.

An open one.

A hardware store. He locked the door, ran behind a counter thick with grime and went down on one knee, pulling out the Combat Mag and a speedloader. He dumped the spent cartridges, quickly inserted the speedloader drum, twisted the knob, and the Mag was loaded.

By then they were thick outside.

They battered into the door and threw themselves against the dusty plate glass windows until cracks began to appear. He took aim and fired at a wormboy leading the charge and the slug took out the window and his

target. The others surged forward in a sea of rot, spearing themselves on shards of glass that didn't even slow them down.

At the same time the window went, the door crashed open and seven, then eight, of them pushed through. He dropped two more, kept firing, emptying the gun as the zombies were felled like dead trees and their fellows began to feed on them.

Slaughter quickly made it into the back of the store, slamming the door shut and throwing the lock. He was in a short corridor with two doors. *Think fast, man: door number one or door number two.* Fuck it. He tried them both. The first led into a cramped storeroom and the other led into the alley…he hoped.

He threw it open and an immense woman was waiting for him.

She was flabby and quite naked, her face huge like an ashen moon, eyes sunken into pockets of flab and fungus. Her breasts were lolling sacks of flour, the nipples like corded hazelnuts leaking gray milk. Black autopsy stitching ran from her crotch to her throat and it was feathered with a blue-green mold.

There was no time for anything but shock.

Slaughter hesitated with the empty .357 in his hand for just one second and she came at him. Before he could ward it off, one gas-plump hand stiff-armed him in the chest and knocked him flat. Not just flat, but sliding him across the floor.

Definitely no time for reloading.

She stood in the doorway, filling it, blocking out the sunlight behind her. She gnashed yellowed teeth together, gagged out a dust of dead flies, and licked her lips with a tongue like a fat black leech. It left a trail of slime on her puckered mouth.

It was then, as his hand gripped the *Kukri*, that he noticed she carried something in one of her arms. What he had taken to be another meaty roll of flab was a child…a little wormkid infant with a face like a caul, its body a rolling, distended mass like a prenatal sack full of sloshing embryonic juice.

The woman took two lumbering steps into the room as the dead pounded on the door in the corridor, wanting in, wanting not just to feed, Slaughter thought, but to view the festivities.

The woman cocked her head to the side as he stood.

Was this defiance? She just wasn't sure.

The baby in her arms made a gurgling sound like its mouth was full of gruel. It dug spiny fingers into its mother's bulk, something like a face moving behind the caul, grinning, chewing, feeding on itself.

Slaughter was beginning to think he might be able to get a speedloader in, but when he reached for the gun, the woman shivered and clots of black wormy earth dropped from the mossy purple-black crevice between her legs which were stout marble pillars.

"Glhhhh," she said as if trying to form word. "Glhhhh?"

A question. One without an answer.

Her hair was a dull, weed-dry gold that must have been beautiful and luxurious at one time. Now it was patchy, crawling with insects. Coffin beetles, mottled black-and-red like bloodstones, were chewing at her scalp, pushing themselves under the skin.

Slaughter held the *Kukri* in one blood-spattered, white-knuckled fist.

The woman stepped forward.

Lips peeled open, yellow teeth were unsheathed.

She reached for him and he slashed out with the Gurkha knife and cleaved one of her breasts open. It split like a casket pillow, scattering filth and drainage and she roared, maybe not so much out of pain but out of damage.

She reached her free arm out at him, scabrous black nails coming within inches of his face and then he jumped back. The zombies were still beating at the other door and he knew it wouldn't hold. His choice was to go through them or go through this woman.

There was no choice.

He'd have to hack straight through her.

One of her eyes pushed out of its seam of fat and winked open, a glossy ova serrated by red veins. She puckered her lips like she wanted to kiss him, expectorated in her throat, and spat a globby/stringy ball of bile at him. He ducked and it splattered against the wall.

She made a chortling sound as if amused.

She dug her fingers between her legs, tearing out a slimy blob of something that dripped a thin watery red sap.

And threw it.

He ducked away from that one, too, and she chortled again. And, worse, her child made a moist giggling noise that sounded like somebody vomiting.

She took two steps forward and Slaughter took two backward.

She was grinning.

He was shaking.

She made a retching sound and gagged up a ball of mucus and slime and spit it at him. As quickly as he ducked it, another came and then another and then another, spattering against the walls like red, juicing inkblots. She repeated the process two, then three times, wiping maggots from her lips and then tossed her child at him.

Slaughter stepped aside and it hit the floor with rubbery, slick sound like a water balloon. It rolled towards him, mewling. He gave it a kick and it squealed, its hide ruptured and black juice spilling out.

The woman cried out and launched herself forward.

Slaughter came at her, meeting her, bringing the *Kukri* down with full force and slicing her bulbous head open lengthwise. She let out a scream that was almost too human and sank to her knees, pudgy pulp fingers exploring her cleaved-open head. Brains ran down what remained of her face in a gray, inching slop like something yanked from a corpse with a funerary hook by an Egyptian embalmer. Blood and pus and clotty drainage poured out, then nests of roaches and pockets of silverfish.

She pitched over, trembling.

The wormkid oozed over the floor and Slaughter gave it a kick that caved in its caul and it slithered about like a rent jellyfish.

He hopped over it and out into the day.

There were more out there and he saw them. He shook the shells from the Combat Mag and inserted his last speedloader with a twist of the drum knob.

Six more rounds.

That's all you got. You better make it count.

By the time he got to his feet and made ready for the killing there were dozens and dozens of them. Like worms sliding free of carrion, they came out of houses and stores, sheds and garages, attics and crawlspaces and weedy drainage ditches. There was a solid mob of them that encircled him now and he knew there was no way, just no way, he could fight through them.

He looked around as they tightened their noose.

Nowhere but up.

If he could shimmy up a raingutter, somehow get up above them onto the roofs, he might stand a chance.

God, the entire rotting population of the town was out there now and then…they parted. They made way for another that stepped into view. A wormgirl. But a special one and even he could see that. She wore a hooded poncho of human skin and a corpse mask which had been stripped from some old hag and carved to look almost totemic.

Slaughter just stared as a voice in his head said, *remember this one. She's important. She's different than the others. She's like a death-goddess to them and you can see the authority she commands.*

Which was something that was very obvious when two wormkids stepped in front of her, offering themselves to her and she took her expiation, her burnt offerings, her sacrifice of flesh without hesitation. White fingers with black, hooked talons in place of nails lashed out and slit the offerings at her feet. They stood still, embracing the ritual. She yanked out their entrails and looped them around her throat in pink scarves. She lifted her mask precious inches to reveal a face that was fissured like pine bark, a drab yellow-white, a hollow skullish cavern where her nose had been. Lips opened and red scarab beetles ran from her mouth. Her teeth were impossibly lustrous black fangs. She stuffed entrails into her mouth and chewed on them.

Then she pointed a clawed finger right at Slaughter.

There was no mistaking it.

And as she did so, he felt a distant rumbling in the back of his skull as if she were not walking meat like the others but something of a higher, spiritually defiled office and wanted him to know this. Her thoughts speared into his own and made him quiver as what she sent out to him nested happily in the dark nether regions of his brain.

Does thee fare well, biker boy?

It was the voice of Black Hat and Slaughter knew it instinctively. There could be no other voice like that…dry and scraping, like a skeleton key scratched over a rusting iron tomb door. It was *him.* The death-goddess was part of him, they were joined together in something. And that was obvious when she lifted the veil that covered her pubis and belly. Her bone-white legs were stained with something like dark menstrual blood or afterbirth and across her gleaming white autopsy-stitched belly something was burned black into the flesh:

That word, that symbol, whatever in the Christ it was. It was everywhere and it was the core of this thing. If he could translate it and know what it meant it would reveal many things. But there was no time to contemplate it because the zombies were massing. They would tear him to bits.

Then the cavalry rolled in.

Once again, the Red Hand arrived.

They came in armored vehicles with shock troops pressing in behind. Light machine guns opened up, cutting down the dead and shooting gouts of fire at them from mounted flame throwers. Then the troops moved in and cut the others down. Slaughter hit the ground and knew there was no escape.

They had him, if that's what they wanted.

But one thing they didn't get was the death-goddess for she was nowhere to be seen.

Once the zombies were nothing but blackened, smoldering refuse in the streets, the troops moved in on Slaughter. He still had the *Kukri* and Combat Mag in his hands.

"The wise thing to do," one of them said with a submachine gun pointed at him, "would be to drop that hardware."

So Slaughter did just that.

And they charged in at him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When he came to the next morning, he was hanging from a crude framework by his wrists. The Ratbags had taken him from Exodus and none too gently. They gave him a quick beating to take the fight out of him and after what he'd been through, there wasn't much fight left. They roped him, gagged him, and threw him in the back of a truck. Whether it was the beating or the rest of it, he couldn't say, but he went out cold and woke up like this. He was still dressed, still wearing his colors, and still sprayed down with gore from the zombies.

Every fucking day, he thought as he peered around the Red Hand encampment, *things just get worse. You get farther away from your brother Disciples and farther away from that compound and the bio there. And farther away from Red Eye.*

Now what?

What in the hell did these assholes want with him?

About an hour after he came out of it, the guy who'd taken him prisoner, the dude with the submachine gun, came over with five men trailing behind him. He was dressed in dirty camo fatigues like the others. He was white-haired, craggy-faced, and seemed to have some sort of bearing that the others lacked.

"You're awake, eh?"

"Sure."

"Suppose you want to be set free?"

"I was thinking that."

The old guy nodded. "I'm Valdez," he said. "I'm in command here. You're my prisoner."

"Okay. What do you want with me?"

Valdez just stood there, staring at him. "You're Slaughter?"

"Yeah. I been called that."

“You’re the one that mixed it up with some of us in Wisconsin. Killed a few of us.”

“So now you’ve got me.”

“Now I’ve got you.” He whispered something to one of the other men. “Question is: what do we do with you?”

“What use am I to you?”

“None that I can see. Of course, we could use a guy like you. You could join up with us.”

“The Hand? No, I’m already patched-in with a different club. I don’t flip patches for no one.”

“I suppose I could kill you.”

“Figured you’d get to that.”

“Uh-huh.” Valdez stroked his chin. “We could torture you…but why expend the energy on a booger-eater like you? You’re strong. You’d make a good slave. A good camp boy to do all the shit nobody else likes. But then we’d have to feed you. And, sooner or later, a guy like you would start killing us to get free.”

It was quite a quandary, all right. Slaughter was amazed at how quickly the Red Hand grapevine worked. They must have been watching for him. Now they had him. Valdez was playing games. Slaughter had killed some Ratbags, they wanted payback. They were going to punish him and he knew it, but Valdez was playing his mindgames, acting like he didn’t know what he was going to do when he’d probably made up his mind long ago.

“See, Slaughter, the thing is that I’ve been pretty much ordered to execute you. That comes from higher up, as a favor to other Red Hand units that you put the hurt on. It’s a brotherhood thing…and you understand brotherhood, do you not?”

Slaughter said nothing. He didn’t even bother smiling at the absurdity of such a thing. Brotherhood? *Brotherhood?* What did a weasel like this squeeze of shit know about brotherhood? What could he possibly know about standing with your brothers shoulder to shoulder and fighting and killing, taking lives and giving them, being splashed with blood and going down only to rise again by the hands of your brothers? This guy didn’t know shit. A fucking marionette. A clown.

Valdez was going on about how tough it was to be in his position. Like anyone else, he claimed, he had orders to follow from higher up. But then, on the other hand, he had to interpret those orders and make them work in a

practical fashion. So, yes, he was told to punch Slaughter's ticket as a favor to his brothers of the Red Hand (Slaughter tried not to laugh at that), but if he did that he had to do it in such a way that he would not be wasting manpower and resources and his little community would actually get some benefit from it.

"So you see my problem, do you not?"

"It's tough being on the top."

Valdez ignored the sarcasm. "What to do, what to do?"

"Just put a fucking bullet in my head and be done with it," Slaughter suggested. "How much manpower does that take?"

Valdez smiled. He was beginning to like this biker. As opposed to so many of his own men, this guy was absolutely fearless. "Well, that's a point well taken, my friend. But honestly…that's so simple and cold-blooded it nearly offends me."

Slaughter just hung there, his arms numb from the wrists to the shoulder. All he wanted at that moment was to be cut free. If that meant he got a bullet, then so be it. He was starting to think this entire ride was a big zero. Nothing but trouble.

"Wait…I think I have a solution," Valdez said. He motioned to a couple of his bully boys and they came over, flashing knives. They sliced Slaughter's bonds and he fell to the ground. It took him a good five minutes to get the feeling back in his arms. But Valdez was a patient man. He had nothing but time. Now that Slaughter was free, the other Ratbags had their weapons on him. They didn't trust him and Slaughter had to respect that. Because he had been beginning to think how easy it would have been to take a knife from one of these stooges. Just a few seconds would be all he would need. Grab the nearest one, stomp his kneecap and smash his Adam's apple, take his knife and put it against Valdez's throat. By the time the other limp dicks got their weapons up, he'd already have their boss hostage.

But they weren't that dumb.

Once he got his blood going again, Valdez dropped him a canteen and he drank down the whole thing. Better. It swept that fuzzy disorientation out of his skull.

"Better?" Valdez asked.

"Sure."

"Anything else?"

"I could handle a steak."

“So could I, my friend. Here. We found these on you. Enjoy.” He tossed a pack of cigarettes and a lighter into the dirt. Slaughter shrugged, picked them up and had a few easy drags. “Okay,” he said. “So what do you got in mind?”

“I’ve come up with perfect solution to our problem. One that will take care of my dilemma, entertain my men, and allow you the dignity of dying like a man.”

One of his bully boys chuckled.

Slaughter waited for it while he finished his smoke. All this high drama for nothing. Valdez had it all planned from the moment they strung him up. Why all the theatrics? Just get to it already.

“You see,” Valdez said, “we are a free-ranging group. Our job is to collect up anything and any*one* we can find. Food, medicine, weapons, supplies of any sort. But it’s hard work. The farther east we range the more dangerous it is. The Army has a kill-on-sight order as far as we’re concerned. We’ve had some nasty engagements. My men grow tired. Bored. Restless. They need entertainment.”

“And I’m it?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Slaughter turned his back on them and had a good long piss. After that, he felt pretty human again save for the stink of zombie gore spattered all over him. But he supposed a shower was out of the question.

“Now that you’re freshened up,” Valdez said, “you’ll take a walk with these gentlemen.”

“Where to?”

Valdez ignored him. “Put him in the cage,” he said. “And tell Benny to bring up Maggot.”

* * *

They led Slaughter through the compound at gunpoint. It was a large, sprawling place that looked like part of an old Army base. As it stood, from what he could see of it, it looked pretty indefensible. There were several small encampments enclosed by sandbags and spooled barbwire, but there were great openings in the ramparts that you could have driven a tank through. The wire was old and rusting, the sandbags leaking. A good force could have overrun the entire thing in minutes. He saw scrub forest beyond

the perimeter in one direction and fields of high yellow grasses in the other. Perfect cover to mount an attack. As they led him on, he saw that the ground was pitted with bomb craters.

They're putting you in the cage…what do you think of that?

But he didn't think much at all about it.

He let himself go cool and easy as he always did before a good action or gang fight. It was the only way to do it. Breathe slowly, rest your muscles, stretch your joints. Don't tense up until you have to. Conserve energy.

The troubling thing, he figured, was that the farther they led him through the compound the more riders they picked up. People began to follow them, not just soldiers but women, too, until there was a crowd of at least thirty people with more pressing in all the time. They led him to a "cage" that was about thirty square feet enclosed by walls of high chainlink fence. It looked like it might have been a dog pen at one time.

They shoved him through the doorway.

The crowd ringed the cage.

When they started to part like the Red Sea, Slaughter figured there was probably a very good reason for it and he wasn't wrong on that: a giant of a man came lumbering along. He was closer to seven feet than six, a huge black zombie with a face of mush. Quilts of decay were threaded into his purple-mottled flesh. He was absolutely gigantic, his body perforated with wounds that oozed a clear slime, and Slaughter figured he weighed well over three-hundred pounds. He was led by five soldiers.

His wrists were tied behind his back and they had a dog collar on him, each pulling him along with lengths of chain attached to it. And they were struggling. The giant was making growling, slobbering noises and that's about as close to speech as it got with him. There were flies all over him and a violent stink not unlike potatoes rotted to soft white pulp emanated from him.

They led him into the cage and forced him to his knees. They unhooked his collar chains and untied his wrists and then beat hell out the door, chaining it shut and slapping a Masterlock on it.

So this was Maggot.

At first, he paid absolutely no attention to Slaughter. He went right at the chainlink walls, screeching and growling and snapping his teeth. He shook the fence and made the gawkers out there take more than one step backwards. He raged at the walls that held him in, trying to bull his way

through and when that didn’t work, he raised his fungi-webbed fingers into the sky and let out an animal roar.

“We told Maggot he could eat you when he was done with you,” Valdez said through the storm fence. “Incentive, you know.”

Maggot turned on Slaughter, just staring at him.

From chin to eye socket, his face was a festering ulcerated cavern eaten through the flesh and right down to the bone in places. He had one good eye, a yellow, rheumy thing swimming in a soup of gummy putrescence; the other was just a ragged pocket of serous drainage. When he opened his mouth, it was filled with maggots.

Slaughter kept his distance as the giant shambled in his direction.

He knew he could only play this game so long.

One thing he was keeping in mind was that Maggot was blind on his left side and his working eye didn’t look like much to begin with. That was something. So Slaughter felt him out, keeping to Maggot’s left, now and again getting into his field of vision to see if the zombie could sight him in. He did, but only when he was close.

Work that, Slaughter told himself. *That’s your edge.*

He kept moving away to the left, keeping Maggot turning in circles while the crowd jeered and made with their catcalls. He knew he wasn’t putting on the show they wanted and he planned on keeping it that way.

But he got distracted by something—a bottle probably—shattering against the fence. That’s when Maggot charged in for the kill. As he reached out, Slaughter did the only thing he could think of—he jabbed him in the face with clenched fists, four or five good shots that would have put any living man to his knees. But Maggot did not go to his knees. He stumbled back from the ferocity and quickness of the attack, his face breaking open like a sore and spilling a foul-smelling ooze but that was about it.

He grinned with a mouth of broken teeth.

“GET HIM, MAGGOT!” one of the Ratbags called. “TEAR HIS FUCKING THROAT OUT! EAT HIS FUCKING LIVER!”

Slaughter kept to the giant’s left side again.

Maggot kept trying to compensate, probably trying to figure out in his rotting brain why this food would not keep still so he could take a good bite out of it. Still, despite his frustration, Maggot managed to maintain his sunny disposition. He grinned at Slaughter, fixing him with that one flat and lifeless eye like a cow considering the cud it was about to chew.

In a surprising show of stealth, he stumbled about blindly and then lashed out peripherally to where he thought the food might be. But that damn food just would not cooperate. It drilled him with several wild roundhouse punches but it didn't get away fast enough. Maggot took hold of it and it was wild and squirming in his grip. He lashed out with a meaty black fist and caught the food in the face and just as he was about to reap the rewards with his teeth, the food got one of its legs behind him and brought it back into the undersides of Maggot's knees, pushing at the same time and Maggot flipped into the dirt.

The crowd hissed and threw more bottles, stones, anything that wasn't tied down.

As Maggot rolled in the dirt, trying to right himself, Slaughter kicked him in the head with his motorcycle boot and a great chunk of meat and skull dislodged from the impact.

Maggot shrieked.

The crowd screamed.

Slaughter grabbed up a handful of rocks that made it over the top of the fence and threw them back at the crowd. A couple of them hit and people swore. A few bottles came now. Not just at the fence but over the top of it. One of them glanced off the giant's head as he stood up uneasily, but he never even noticed.

Maggot charged and Slaughter ducked away from him.

When Maggot came around again, Slaughter jumped up and gave him a drop kick that put the zombie back on his ass. As he clawed around, trying to stand, Slaughter kicked him in the face two and then three times. By then, Maggot's soft and puffy face was a drooping, liquid mass of excrescence.

But it did not slow him.

He was up and ready for more.

Slaughter knew that all he was doing were delaying tactics. Because without a weapon in his hands, he could beat the giant for hours and it would have little effect other than to tire himself out.

Maggot came around again.

Slaughter backpedaled, his boot rolling on one of the bottles, and he lost his balance. That's all Maggot needed to gain the advantage. Before Slaughter could get his feet under him properly and his equilibrium in line, Maggot came at him like a fighter in the tenth round going in for the kill.

He gave Slaughter a shot to the temple with one fist and then another to the jaw in rapid succession. The zombie was incredibly strong and the second blow sent Slaughter spinning in the dirt. He tried to rise up, his head rioting with stars, but another fist from Maggot put him down.

He lay there, dazed, confused, spitting blood, and wondering if he really had anything left to fight with. He saw it all in perspective in that moment as the crowd cried out for his blood, the hate coming off of them hot and rancid. His entire life spent hitting and being hit, fighting with fists and knives, going down and rising up, taking lives and stomping faces. Where had it gotten him? *Here,* that's where. In the dusty hard-packed clay of a cage with this flesh-eating monster while the citizens pressed in like hungry dogs. *Civilization.* He'd never had much respect for it because he'd always been on the outside, but as he looked at Maggot coming for him yet again and saw the near-orgasmic thrill it gave the animals beyond the wire, he knew if there'd ever been such a thing as civilization—which he doubted—that it was long gone now and the human race had finally taken off its genteel mask of sophistication and refinement. It was midnight at the masquerade and all bets were off. The human race showed its yellow fangs and slobbering mouth, it raised its dirty backside to the world and extended its middle finger. *Ha, ha, ha, what a good gag it all was! Us…the human race, pretending to be educated and enlightened, compassionate and charitable, the children of a higher god! What a fucking lark! But that's all done now. So see us, every man and woman and child, in our unfettered primal fuck-you-and-yours-I-got-mine savage, selfish, simian glory! Look upon the true face of the race: hatred and intolerance, bloodlust and gluttony, the killer ape fresh from the dark jungle flaunting every one of the seven deadly sins, reveling in them and rolling in their iniquity like pigs in shit!*

"Welcome home…*citizens,"* Slaughter said under his breath.

Another Zen moment.

Of all times.

But, as usual, it slowed the flow and stilled the frame and let him see reality not as people wanted it to be but as it truly was. Amazing. All these years he thought citizens were limp-wristed, weak, and wan…but the truth was that they hid their true natures behind that thin yellowing membrane they called civilization and this is what they really were: animals. By God,

all the 1%ers had raged against them all these years never realizing that, under the skin, *all* human beings were inherently 1%ers.

But by then, of course, the revelations ceased because Maggot took hold of him. Picking him up off the ground as if he weighed about as much as a feather pillow, lifting him up over his head—that drove the crowd absolutely wild and orgasmic—and throwing him through the air against the fence. The impact was painful and so was the fall that followed. But when Slaughter hit the dirt, he came up grinning, wiping blood from his face, knowing that if he accomplished nothing in this life he must, above all things, totally fuck-up things for the animals out there.

He must piss on their parade and shit in their party punch.

And he saw just how to do it.

Maggot had him again. He lifted him up, pressing him against the fence and Slaughter got his elbow against the zombie's throat so those teeth couldn't get at him. Maggot's tomb-breath was hot and feverish in his face.

"KILLLLLL HIIIIIMMMMMM!" the crowd called out.

"GET HIM, MAGGOT!"

"PULL HIS STOMACH OUT! EAT HIS FUCKING SPLEEN!"

Maggot was worked up into a wild delirium by then. He needed to get his teeth into the food so that he could fill himself with it but the food was strong, the food was cunning, the food fought back with amazing agility. But he would win because he always won in the end…but then the food reached one hand out and dug its clawing fingers into the side of Maggot's neck where there was a bloated purple-blue pouch of rot and worms. It was soft as the flesh of a rotten peach and those fingers dug in there, tearing at the pouch and ripping it open in a gushing of graveworms and fetid meat. Those claws took hold of something more substantial and yanked, pull, tore, *ripped.*

Maggot screamed as a great chunk of muscle and meat was torn out of his throat. The action made his head slump to the side, made his neck feel like rubber.

He dropped Slaughter.

The crowd booed and hissed; they did not like this.

"C'MON, MAGGOT!"

Maggot, his head bobbling, went down to one knee, fingers trying to halt the flow of ichor and liquefied tissue from his throat. Slaughter came at him and kicked him in the face. That head snapped back on the damaged neck,

spraying corpse goo, the left cheekbone shattered to running pulp. And the muscles that held his one good eye in place went flaccid and it popped out of the socket, dangling back and forth.

Maggot made a whining, almost pathetic sound.

He was trying to stand. He finally did…almost. But as he made it up, wobbling from side to side, Slaughter gave his left, and weaker, kneecap a jumping stomp that shattered it and dropped him back down, crippled and moaning.

It was easy then.

Slaughter grabbed one of the rocks and smashed one of the bottles that had been thrown until he had a good shank of jagged glass. He slashed Maggot's dangling eye with it, blinding him. Then he slashed his throat, two, three, four times as the zombie's hands sought him out. Slaughter darted in again and slashed it across the opening in the side of the throat he'd made with his fingers. Maggot's head slumped to his shoulder.

He was almost done now.

The crowd had grown noticeably quiet.

Maggot could barely hold himself up on his knees.

Slaughter slashed at his throat again and again, cutting deeper and deeper. With a barking noise, Maggot rolled over into the dirt. Slaughter jumped on him and cut free the last few ligaments that held his head in place. Using his knee as a brace, his snapped the vertebrae and twisted Maggot's head free…then he swung it around and around and threw it like discus out into the crowd that screamed and scattered.

They probably would have shot him down at that point.

But the sky had scabbed over purple-and-blue like a contusion and yellow forks of lightning split it open.

The rain began to fall.

And people ran.

Chapter Twenty-Three

By the time the rain started coming down in sheets and turning the ground to rolling mud, Slaughter had climbed up and over the fence of the cage and dropped into the muck on the other side. The rain was cool and cleansing and it felt good as he stood in it, trying to see through it, trying to figure out where some shelter might be. It kept coming down, drenching him, cleaning the stink and remains of zombie gore off of him.

But he knew that, at any moment, the worms might start coming down, too.

He had to find shelter.

In the distance were those encampments and he made for the nearest one, hoping he'd make it and not get shot when he jumped the perimeter. He ran through the mud, slipping and falling, getting up again and then tripping over something and going face-first into the slop. He rose up, the rain washing the muck from his face.

There was a woman there.

She was hugging herself and rocking back and forth on her haunches.

That's what he tripped over.

"You better get to cover!" he shouted at her, but she just shook her head.

He knew at that moment that every second was precious. He should have run. He should have worried about himself but he knew if he did that, he knew if he abandoned the woman and saved his own skin, he was no better than the citizens who'd cheered on his death in the cage. And he *knew* he was better than them. At least, now he was.

He grabbed the woman by the arm and pulled her up.

She didn't fight.

She didn't do anything.

She just stood there with absolute dejection, wet hair plastered to her face. She was nearly limp as he dragged her along, mumbling something or

other about wanting to stay out in the rain and wait for the worms.

He pulled her along, slopping forward to the nearest barbwired encampment. As they came through the wire, a man with an M-16 came out of the gathering darkness. He almost walked right into Slaughter. Slaughter chopped the edge of his hand across the guy's nose and kicked him in the head when he fell. He grabbed the rifle and pulled the woman into the compound with him. In the rain, no one fired because if there were guns out there, no one could be sure in that deluge who was a Ratbag and who was not. There was a little tin shack at the foot of a hillside that might have been a guard house once.

"C'mon!" Slaughter said, dragging her forward.

When he got her to the shack, he pushed her down in the mud, grabbed the latch on the door and threw it open, jumping to the side. A couple of shots rang out. Some swearing. Some shouting.

Slaughter rolled over the ground through the muck and puddles and came to a rest on his belly, firing indiscriminately into the shack. A man cried out and fell from the doorway and a woman screamed, tried to pull him back in. Slaughter sprayed both of them down and yanked their corpses out, throwing them in the puddles. He pulled the woman in there and latched the door, breathing heavily.

"That was tight," he said.

The falling rain on the tin shack sounded like popcorn popping. There were a few tiny leaks in the ceiling and a few drops of rain still fell, but it was dry and it was warm. There were dry blankets on a shelf and a couple of chairs against the wall, a candle flickering in the corner.

Had yourselves a cozy little love shack here, eh, citizens? he thought with absolutely no sympathy. *Well ain't that too fucking bad?*

He wondered how many rocks and bottles the two he had killed had thrown at him. How many jeers and boos they had called out. How badly had they cheered on his death?

"What's your name?" he asked the woman.

"Does it matter?"

"Sure."

He wrapped her in a blanket. She was small and shivering, her hair long and straight, dishwater blonde. She had a nice face, blue eyes, girl-next-door pretty but despondent as hell. Something in her had been yanked out and crushed.

“Maria,” she said.

“Slaughter.”

She did not look at him. She looked at the floor. She did not speak, he soon realized, unless she was spoken to. She acted like some of the weaklings he remembered from prison. The bitch-boys and punks that the hardtimers used as girlfriends. She was like them: trained, silent, obedient. Not a shred of defiance in her.

“Were you a camp woman?”

She looked up at him. “I was a whore to be used.”

Jesus. Thoroughly broken.

“I suppose that’s what you want,” she said, lifting her shirt and exposing two pert breasts that were grimy and sullied by purple bruises.

He pulled her shirt back down. “I got other things on my mind right now.”

“You’re not going to rape me?” she said.

“Honey, I never raped anyone in my life,” he told her. “It was always given to me, I never had to take it.”

He felt a foolish, almost boyish and immature need to brag of his sexual conquests to her. The club runs and parties back in the old days. All the women who’d show up. Not just biker babes but hot college girls and attractive housewives looking for a ride on the wild side, looking to escape the dull confines of their ordered lily-white worlds, attracted by bad boys as women of all stripes were always attracted by bad boys. But what was the point in telling her that stuff? It would have been silly. Like a thirteen-year old kid bragging in the locker room about the handjob Betty Sue had given him in her parent’s garage. Puerile.

“You don’t have to take it, I’ll give it to you.”

“I don’t want it.”

She looked dejected. “You don’t think I’m pretty?”

“Got nothing to do with it. Right now it’s about surviving.”

She was silent for a time but he could feel her warming up to him, intrigued that he had no interest in her body. “I thought bikers always raped women.”

He laughed. “That’s what citizens always want everyone to think.” He shrugged. “Some of us do. But so do some citizens. People are people and animals are animals.”

She seemed to think about that for a time as if the idea of something like that had never occurred to her. “You killed those two people.”

“They would have killed me,” he explained. “Those two were more than happy to watch me die in the cage.”

“Yes, they were.” She stared at the rusting tin walls, pulled the blanket tighter around her. “I didn’t think anyone would ever kill Maggot. You don’t know how many people he killed and ate in there.”

“I can guess. But you can’t blame him for that. He wasn’t responsible for what he was. You give a starving dog a juicy bone and he’ll bite it. And I just bet they kept him hungry.” He shook his head. “The real monsters were outside the cage. The ones who got all hot and bothered to watch me die an ugly death.”

Slaughter was amazed by his own enlightenment. Had those Zen experiences of late changed him in some way, transformed him? He wondered if it wasn’t true. Ever since the trip on the peyote express he had been thinking differently, seeing things clearer. He had to watch that. Compassion and wisdom even were grand things, but enlightened men tended to become martyrs and he couldn’t have that. He had to keep his edge. He had to find his brothers. He had to lead them at the fortress so he could snatch the bio and set his brother free, get old Red Eye out of the hot seat.

They listened to the rain coming down as the candle burned low. It was a nice sound. He pulled the blanket up tighter and realized he was getting too comfortable. He couldn’t afford to sleep right now.

“Why did you want to stay out there?” he asked her.

Maria looked at him, then looked away. “I wanted the worms to get me.”

“Why?”

Now she did not look away. “Do you know what life has been like for me?”

He nodded. “Still…rising back up as a dead thing isn’t much of a plan.”

“It sounded okay to me.”

The rain kept falling and they could hear it sluicing in rivers and creeks, expanding into ponds and muddy bogs that would become lakes in time. Thunder boomed off and on. Water dripped from the roof.

“Listen,” Maria said.

Slaughter did. He heard nothing at first and then: *plink, plink, plink.* It was either a hailstorm, which he had not seen in years, or a worm rain. No,

too soft for hail. It was worms, all right. He could hear their small, soft bodies smashing against the shed. Out there in the distance, people were crying out, either trapped in the rain or just terrified at the idea of it.

Maria was shivering. “I hate worms. I hate all worms.”

“And you were going to give yourself to them?”

“I wasn’t thinking straight.”

The sound of the worms falling seemed to go on interminably and Slaughter was thankful for the candle. Being in the dark and not being able to see them if they breached the shack would have brought him a little too close to out-and-out madness. *Plink-plink, plink, plink, plink, plink-plink, plink, plink, plink*…on and on it went and then Maria let loose with a little scream and Slaughter saw why. A worm had gotten through the tiny hole in the roof and landed on his blanketed lap. He flicked it off and crushed it under his boot.

But another fell, and another.

Tearing a strip off the blanket, he stood on the chair and wadded the material into the hole so no more could get in. When it was tight and impenetrable, he jumped down and smashed the intruders. They were only about an inch long, immature as all the worms that fell were, but fat and soft. Repulsive.

He sat back down and Maria clung to him. She was shivering. He pulled her tight against him and she molded right into his body, but she did not stop shaking.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“No, no I’m not.”

* * *

An hour later, the rain had stopped.

No more worms.

That part of the downfall only lasted ten or fifteen minutes and then it was pure rain again. When they stepped outside, it was still daylight. A grainy uneven daylight, but daylight all the same. The sky was pink streaked by red and scudded with indigo clouds, but it was clear, no storms on the horizon. The landscape looked like Flanders in 1915 during the height of the Great War: a great bubbling swamp of mud with corpses trapped in it, hands and limbs and sightless staring faces rising from the

muck. Slaughter saw at least a dozen dead, but figured there were probably many more sunken beneath the mire.

Tomorrow night they would rise up.

“It’ll be dark before long,” Maria said. “We better find a place to hide.”

He looked at her. “The wormboys?”

“There’s other things out here,” was all she would say.

They saw a few stragglers dragging themselves through the mud, but no armed bands of Ratbags. They were either dead or scattered or lying low. And that was okay. Slaughter had already checked the load on his weapon and he had no more than ten or twelve rounds at best.

They were down in the lowest part of the compound, he saw. Almost a bowl hemmed in by rising hills. He figured none of it was natural. The Army or whoever built this place had landscaped it to resemble a battlefield of sorts. The hills rose in tiers, each set having a few tin shacks or bunkers dug into them with perimeters of barbwire. He decided they needed to get up and out of the slop so, Maria behind him, they followed a greasy trail up and out to the next tier where there was a flattened walkway. The bunkers looked empty and he checked them one by one. Maybe the Red Hand were in the other encampments. He saw a few corpses, skittering rats, some standing water in the bunkers, but not much else.

“That one over there,” Maria suggested.

It was a wood-framed hut built right into the hillside. It was much larger than the shack and looked somewhat defensible. As they made their way over there, a low warm wind began to blow. The world was silent, a dim light laying over it.

There was a red cross on the door of the hut and it must have been some kind of aid station for war games. For reasons he did not even fully understand, Slaughter knocked on the door a few times before opening it and going in low with the M-16 held out before him. It was warm and dry inside. There were a couple of cots, a few empty drug cabinets. A woman with glazed eyes was sitting in a chair before a folding table.

“Don’t mind us,” he said.

She didn’t mind them at all. In fact, she seemed utterly oblivious to their presence. She mumbled under her breath, chattered her teeth, and shook with sudden quick spasms. Her teeth were bad, her face pockmarked with sores. She looked like a meth freak.

Slaughter looked over at Maria and she shook her head, twirled her finger next to her temple to indicate this lady was crazy. They sat together on one of the cots and watched the crazy woman, intrigued by her own closed world of madness.

She was clutching something to her breast with muddy fingers and then she revealed it, setting it on the table: a jelly jar. A jelly jar about a third way full with squirming red worms. Slaughter and Maria just watched. They said nothing, appalled, but not really surprised. Still humming and mumbling, the woman pulled a baggie of brown powder from the pocket of her flannel shirt. Slaughter thought it looked like low-grade Mexican brown heroin cut with something. From between her legs came a little vinyl fanny pack. She unzipped it and took out a spoon and a hypodermic needle, a Bic lighter and something like a small set of blunt tongs that he knew was a garlic press. Then a set of medical forceps.

Bitch is going to spike up right in front of us, he thought.

With shaking hands she searched around, patting herself, and then pulled a length of rubber hose from inside her shirt. It was dirty and well-used, as was the needle. She rolled up her sleeve and tied off the rubber hose at her bicep. Her forearm was bruised and ugly with needle tracks.

Maria took his hand, tried to pull him up so they could leave.

But he would not leave.

He had to see this. He had heard about this shit but he had always thought it was some kind of half-baked urban legend. Now that the tourniquet was tied off, the woman spilled some powder carefully into the spoon, patting it down with the tip of one finger. Setting the spoon aside gently…very gently…she took up the forceps and dug around in the jar of worms until she had a real good fat one. Most of them were sluggish or dead. But the worm she chose was quite lively. She brought it out and captured it in the garlic press. Licking her lips, her humming rising higher and higher, she crushed the worm with the press, the pale pink juice dripping into the powder on the spoon. She set it aside and, taking up the spoon, brought the flame of the lighter beneath it until the powder and worm juice became a bubbling liquid mass.

Her humming sounded like erotic joy by this time.

“Let’s go,” Maria said. “Please.”

Slaughter ignored her. There was a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches on the window sill. He helped himself, smoking and watching,

transfixed.

Using the syringe, the haggard woman sucked up the pale brown fluid and, breathing heavily, selected a vein that wasn't collapsed. She jabbed the needle into it, gasping with pleasure, sucked up some blood, then injected the syringe of fluid into her vein.

She set the needle aside, pulled off the tourniquet.

"Please," Maria said, pulling on Slaughter's arm. "Let's get out of here before she starts talking."

The woman began to grin, huge and moony, her glazed eyes bright and sparkling.

Then, wetting her lips, she turned and faced her visitors and began to speak.

* * *

"I know what you seek," said the woman. "I can see it."

Slaughter just stared at her. "Do you?"

"Yes."

"What I'm doing I'm doing for my brother."

The woman tittered with laughter that was acerbic, caustic even. "The one you seek was here. He laid with me. He spoke the tongue in my ear."

Slaughter looked at Maria but she did not meet his gaze.

"He said…he said you would come and I would know you. That your name is Death and that you ride a pale horse," the woman said, her eyes almost blazing now as if something in her brain were slowly smoldering. "He said I would see the hate in your soul, the murder in your eyes, and smell the blood upon your hands. I would know you as Death."

"You don't know shit, lady."

She smiled at him. "But I do, John Slaughter. You are Death. On the surface you can tell yourself that you seek freedom for your brother but underneath, in the darkest tracts of your soul, you only want to kill and kill again. You are Death but you pretend to be freedom and life. And that is the great irony, is it not? That Death does not even recognize himself *as* Death."

Slaughter was stunned.

The crazy bitch knew his name, about his brother, and was that just because Black Hat had told her or was it the drugs? Did that worm juice

tweak some latent telepathy or powers of prophecy? He didn't know. Couldn't know. But it disturbed him greatly.

He swallowed, looked at Maria.

She still would not meet his gaze. As the crazy woman fell into some weird little fugue, her eyes rolling back white in her head, he grabbed hold of Maria's chin none too gently and forced her to look at him. "Do they always do this? Does shooting up that worm juice make them read minds?"

"Sometimes."

"Just sometimes?"

Maria shrugged, then sighed. "Some of them just go into a stupor and mumble. Others lose their minds. Some, like this one, have certain abilities. They can see things and know things."

The woman's eyes rolled in their sockets, then focused with a glassy clarity. "He said you would come because this is the land of the dead and you will ascend the throne of death because it is your calling."

"Bullshit."

Again that simply awful laughter which raised goosebumps on the backs of Slaughter's bare arms.

"He caused all this, didn't he?"

The woman just stared at him.

"All of this was from his hand?"

"Men caused this."

But Slaughter didn't believe that. Not entirely. Maybe it was close proximity to this worm-witch (as he was beginning to think of her) but in his mind so many things that had long been vague and unformed were taking on a curious sort of shape. "No, not men. Men are puppets to a thing like him. He feeds off death and pain and insanity. He revels in it. He mainlines it. He's nothing but a fucking leech."

"No!"

"Yes. He's responsible for bringing this death into the world. The worm rains and the wars that followed it…it's all a fucking page written in his hand, in his book."

"You lie!" the woman nearly screamed at him. "He said Death would lie! That Death despaired of the truth! *You* are the king of liars! *You* are the king of spades! *You* are Death riding a pale horse with Hell following you just as he said!"

"He's a liar."

“No! No! No!”

“Yes. He’s the liar. Tell me his name.”

The woman was shaking now, contorting. Tears ran from her eyes and a revolting stench issued from her that smelled almost like burning flesh and singed hair. It was hot and febrile. “He has no name!”

“Yes, he does. Tell me.”

“I will not!”

“Yes, you will.”

“I cannot!”

“But you must.”

Her head whipped from side to side. *“No, never!”*

“I’ll find him. I’ll hunt him down. I’ll make him pay for all this.”

“No!”

Slaughter stood up and picked up his rifle. “Tell me his name.”

But she wouldn’t so he put the barrel of the M-16 up to her eye and put his finger on the trigger. She thrashed and cried out, flailing and weeping, calling out mixed-up prayers and psalms, her legs kicking and her hands flailing. Her face ran with sweat. Her tongue lolled from her mouth. Her eyes rolled back white again. And her voice, shrill and screeching and nearly inhuman in tone, said, *“You! You! You! You came as he said you would! You stand here in the flesh! Death! Oh, abominable, hungry Death! Pestilence! Plague! War! Famine! It is wrought by your hand and written in the Book of Hell! I will not be witness to it! DO YOU HEAR ME, DEATH? I SHALL NOT BE WITNESS TO YOUR BLASPHEMY AND YOUR MURDER AND YOUR SEETHING HATE! I-I-I-I WILL NOT!”*

She was moving with wild greased gyrations by that point. The burning smell was stronger about her and blood ran from her mouth. It filled her eyes and dripped from her ears. Then she slumped over and hit the floor. As she laid there, obviously dead, limbs askew, mouth still wide, eyes still staring, steam began to rise from her like she was melting. It carried an acrid stink of burning flesh.

Something was happening.

Something revelatory.

Maria was openly crying out in her fear, but Slaughter was close to something, he thought, or maybe miles distant. Yet, he knew what was happening was not by accident. He had the most uncanny feeling that it was meant for him and him alone. As the steam continued to rise, filling the hut

with a sickening odor, he used the barrel of his rifle and pulled the woman's shirt up and there it was as he knew it must be. Her belly was rising like bread dough, pushing up to form letters that were going from pink to red like scalded flesh. Then there was a searing, burning stench and he saw it, he saw it once again:

Just like all the others, it was branded right into her. Upraised and branded right into the flesh and just the sight of it made him take a stumbling step towards the door. He stepped out into the air which, although dank and cool, was comparatively fresh compared to what he'd been breathing in the hut. He was dizzy. Woozy. His knees were weak and his legs were shaking. He found an overturned crate and dropped his ass on it, breathing in and out, clearing his mind.

"Are you all right?" Maria said, wiping tears from her face.

He was still trembling. "Yeah…I'm okay."

"I told you we should leave," Maria said to him. "I told you that they say things. Things you don't want to hear."

He nodded. "Question is: how much of what she said can we believe?"

"I don't know."

"She knew things she shouldn't have known. I can't explain that with ordinary logic, now can I? And, even if I could, I sure as hell couldn't explain those words burned into her." Before he could stop himself he told Maria about that word and where he had seen it before. "I don't know what it means but Black Hat is behind it."

"Black Hat?"

Since he had started telling the tale, he went through the whole spiel, telling her about that video at the compound in Wisconsin, his dreams, and specifically about Frank Feathers and the Skeleton Man.

Maria was silent for a moment when he was finished. "I've seen it before," she finally said.

“You’ve seen it, too?”

She shook her head. “Just in a book.”

She explained that in college she was into occultism and New Age stuff, everything from healing crystals to pyramid power and the tarot. It was just a kick and lot of kids were into it. “In 1611, I think, this priest named Father Louis Gaufridi was executed for sending demons to possess the nuns of Aix-en-Provence in France. During his trial they found a pact with the Devil signed in blood. It bore the reverse signatures of six major demons of Hell and was countersigned by a seventh.”

Slaughter was sitting forward now. “Tell me the name.”

“Leviathan,” she said.

Slaughter heard it, felt it echo through his head and knew it was right. He formed the word silently with his lips. *Leviathan.* To him, it had power and diabolical force but that was mainly because of the circumstances relating to it. He remembered hearing the name in Catholic school as a kid. He thought leviathan had something to do with a whale and told Maria this.

“Sure,” she said, “people call whales leviathans. It sometimes means a fire-breathing sea monster. But in demonology, Leviathan is one of the four crown princes of Hell. He’s the gatekeeper. He tempts men with carnal sin, murder, and avarice. He is a god of chaos. His direction is west. West, traditionally, being where people thought the dead went because the sun sets in the west so they thought it was the land of the dead.”

“So he’s the lord of the dead?”

She shrugged. “It’s open to interpretation, I guess. All that stuff is.”

But it would fit. He had seen those weird little altars in several towns, like offerings made to some pagan god. Maybe that pagan god was Leviathan and maybe his worshippers were the zombies. It made a crude sort of sense. In Exodus, he had seen the wormgirl, the death-goddess, maybe she was like some kind of high priestess. Again, he was reaching but it all seemed to make some kind of sense, for who else would the undead worship but something like Leviathan? Back in Victoria, where he’d found all those impaled corpses on the green, he also found that old man with the words burned into his back, the signature of Leviathan. And what had the old man said? The one who perpetrated that atrocity said his name was *Nemesis,* which could be construed as adversary or enemy.

Nemesis…I am Nemesis.

“Yes, to all living things you certainly are.”

“What?” Maria asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing.” Then the obvious occurred to him. “Can Leviathan mean the Devil or something like the Devil?”

“Yes.”

She was very uncomfortable with it all and he could see that. He didn’t know what to think about it all. He had never in his life believed in the Christian Devil. He had always pretty much associated it as being symbolical for the animal side of men and their primal past. With all he had seen, was he now ready to believe in something as intrinsically offensive to a reasoning mind as a demon or the Devil himself? He wasn’t sure. He really wasn’t sure. Maybe not the Devil, but perhaps the sort of thing that had inspired such belief. Because it really fit. All of it did. Frank Feathers had told him of the brutal murders in Crabeater Creek in association with the Skeleton Man. The murder part fit. The chaos thing did, too, because the worm rains had certainly created chaos. And the west being the Land of the Dead…well, that was certainly true enough.

If what that worm-witch had said was true, then Black Hat was expecting him, knowing that, inadvertently, Slaughter was following him. They were going to meet. Slaughter knew that. And it was going to be an ugly affair when they did. Who was he to fight something like Leviathan? He did not know. Yet, he almost felt that it was fated.

But one thing was for sure: he wasn’t about to ascend the throne of death. It wasn’t his calling. If he had one, it was to purge Leviathan from the world.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The shadows were growing very long and they knew they weren't about to spend the night in the hut with the corpse of the worm-witch, so they struck out for something better. And about that time, they heard screams coming from across the encampments. The sound of gunfire. Down in the mud bowl below people were running. Shouting. It was coming from every direction.

Maria was nervous.

So was Slaughter.

He led her up to the next tier and they came across a man lying in the dirt. His throat was torn out and recently, they knew, from the blood pooling around him that was still fresh, still very wet. Another man was tangled in the barbwire. Like the first, he was dressed in fatigues. Ratbags. There was an arrow in his back. Not a modern streamlined thing but a crude shaft that looked like it had been carved from a stick of wood, but deadly just the same.

His head was missing.

What the hell is this now?

"We have to find a place to hide!" Maria said. "We have to hurry!"

"What's going on?"

She looked around frantically, her eyes beady and filled with fear. "Mutants," she said. "Headhunters."

Slaughter was going to ask her what she was talking about and then, from below, near to the hut, a man ran screaming and four hobbling shapes took him down. He saw that they were both men and women, judging from the pendulous breasts on a couple.

And then Maria cried out.

A woman came running from a bunker in their direction, a look of absolute desperation and absolute horror on her face. And it didn't take long to see why: the mutants were hunting her.

A trio of them hemmed her in and took her down.

Slaughter got a good look at them.

None of them were more than five feet in height. They were thick-bodied and bow-legged, apelike, with long dangling muscular arms. They were all naked, bodies greased with clotted gray mud that was so thick in places it was cracking open like parched earth. Where the mud had worn away he could see that their skeletons were exaggerated, jutting, their seamed yellow skins barely covering the architecture of bones beneath. Their hair was long and tangled like ditchweed, knotted up ritualistically with sticks and bonepipes, pulled into crude roped dreadlocks with snakeskin thongs and feather clusters.

He fired on semi-auto, busting two 5.56 mm slugs into the back of one of them. The creature—a male—jerked from the impact, but did not go down. He turned and snarled, bearing a mocking grin of crooked, protruding teeth and loops of saliva. The incisors and canines were sharp and doglike.

As the other two mutants literally tore the poor woman apart, this one charged with a hatchet in its gnarled hand.

Slaughter did not hesitate: he fired on full auto, spraying the mutant in the chest. This time the creature went down, making a low grunting sound that could have been pain or pleasure or both. He rose back up, spilling blood from his wounds, and Slaughter put three more in his head and he pitched into the mud, convulsing.

The other two had succeeded in eviscerating the woman now and were fighting over her entrails. A couple more, excited by the smell of blood, loped over there and two more began sniffing around the corpse of the one Slaughter shot. One of them chopped off the woman's head with an axe and held it high like a trophy.

"C'mon!" Slaughter said, dragging Maria to her feet. "Don't fold up on me for chissake!"

More mutants were massing now. There was no way in hell they could hold off those primal monsters with an M-16; there were too many and Slaughter was pretty sure he was down to four or five rounds by that point, but he didn't dare take the time to check. From all across the encampments he could hear shooting, screaming, people dying. The Red Hand had superior weapons, but against the sheer number of mutants it was hopeless. The mutants were loosely organized into hunting bands, but driven into a psychotic kill-frenzy by hunger. They didn't fear death. They celebrated it,

glorified in bloody carnage. A wolf pack with only a vague resemblance to men.

Slaughter led Maria away, only firing when they were threatened.

They climbed quickly to the uppermost tier which seemed to be mutant-free. The bunkers up there were arranged so that they had a perfect, unobstructed killzone before them. The only way the enemy could get at these was to climb the hillside or drop down from above. The first bunker they checked was collapsed, the second was filled with sand and had no weapons. But the third was exactly what they were looking for. It was reinforced concrete, sandbagged, with a .50 caliber machine gun emplacement and a barbwire perimeter. Military surplus was stacked along the low walls. Apparently the Red Hand was using it for storage.

It had been years since he had fired a fifty cal, but it came back to him quick enough. He pulled back the bolt and fed in the belt from the ammo box.

“Please…please don’t let them get me,” Maria said. “You don’t know what they do.”

“I can imagine,” Slaughter told her.

In the setting sunlight, he saw a group of mutants climbing the muddy hillside up at them. They clawed their way up, using their powerful arms and swinging themselves in rapid ascension like monkeys climbing trees. There were a series of barbwire perimeters confronting them, but they crawled up and over the first, torn and bloody, but undaunted in their hunt for meat.

“Okay,” Slaughter said. “This is going to get loud.”

Maria was hunched over behind him and now she curled up in a ball and, if he hadn’t known it before, he knew now that she was going to be absolutely no use in a fight. It made him think of Dirty Mary. She would have relished something like this. Oh, she’d have been scared, too, but once her claws were out, he knew, you’d never have suspected it. He was beginning to really miss her…or maybe he was only now allowing himself to admit it.

In the dying light, Slaughter got a bead on the mutants. They were smeared with blood and one of them brandished a severed arm like a club. He opened up and the fifty did its work just fine. The mutants literally exploded when the .50 cal slugs ripped into them. They were cut in half, throwing up mists of blood and bone fragments. A few more tried to climb

either to feed on their downed brothers or to get up at the bunker and Slaughter cut them down. He scattered a few more packs, driving them into the shadows and out of sight.

As darkness came on, he could still hear the screams of the dying from the encampments. That and the grunting and growling of the mutants as they fed.

“Maria?” Slaughter said.

She was still curled up behind him, just shaking.

“Listen,” he said. “I need your help here, man. I can’t do it all myself. You gotta pitch in.”

She sat up. “What do I have to do?”

“Start going through those crates and see what we have.”

Hesitantly, she did. She found a few more ammo boxes for the .50 cal, some medical supplies, bottled water, military MREs, some flares, but no grenades. That was the one thing that he had been hoping for. She passed out food and water, arranged some flares for the long night and then just sat there, staring, practically comatose again.

By the time it was fully dark, the screams out there had all but subsided. They could still hear the mutants from time to time but even that was lessening. The hot wind carried a raw, evil stink of death and suffering.

“You need to tell me about these things out there,” Slaughter said, knowing he had to somehow slap her out of her current state.

In a low, weak voice she said, “They’re flesh-eaters.”

“I figured that.”

“Headhunters. That’s what people call them because they always take heads.”

Slaughter sighed. “Yeah. I got that much.”

“They come in packs and murder everyone. Some of the women they carry off to—”

“Figured that, too.”

“They usually attack towards dark like this and the Red Hand knows it. They haven’t been after us in a month or more,” Maria explained. “I think…I think people let their guard down. I think the headhunters knew that and waited for it.”

Out in the darkness below he could hear the unmistakable sounds of the mutants feeding—snapping bones, chewing, now and then shrieking, and howling.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Out in the compound, it was quiet.

A deathly brooding silence had fallen and Slaughter wasn't caring for it much. All they needed was for a few of those things to slip up in the dark and make it into the bunker and that would be it. He still had the M-16, but it was nearly out of shot. What he would have given to have his Combat Mag again and a few speedloaders for the close-in stuff. Back in his days as a Marine, they would have set out landmines and Claymores, tripflares and boobytraps to secure the perimeter. Now he just had his five senses. But he had to remain vigilant, which wasn't easy because he was so damn tired. His eyes kept shutting. Some coffee or a couple of bennies would have been nice.

Maria was awake.

He could feel her behind him. She was breathing softly but now and again she would move. He didn't know what the hell he was going to do with her. In the old days, he would have probably tossed her to the headhunters if she didn't earn her keep, but now he was thinking he had to get her somewhere. Somewhere safe. But where exactly was that? He wondered if the other Disciples were still alive, still riding hard and giving hell.

She's going to be trouble and you know it. She's like a child and you don't have the time to be babysitting anyone.

But what the hell could he do?

Things were different now. He just couldn't leave. And that meant in the morning—if they even saw the morning—she'd have to come with when he made his break out of this place. He had a pretty good idea that by dawn there wouldn't be any Ratbags left to stop him and was that a good thing or a bad thing?

Now and again he heard a night bird crying out or the distant and terrible roar of some nocturnal predator. It was hard to say what that might have been, but he didn't think he was being overly-imaginative when he thought it sounded prehistoric.

The eerie silence and blanketing darkness were almost unbearable.

Slaughter dug around next to him.

"What are you doing?" Maria asked him, her voice almost neurotic in its intensity.

"Putting a flare out," he said.

What he didn't tell her was that the stillness out there was making his skin crawl and his experience told him that this was more than nerves but a warning signal.

He aimed the flare pistol and fired it. There was a muted pop and the flare went up over the compound, throwing out a flickering red-yellow illumination that swept over the ragged landscape, creating a surreal world of strobing shapes and jumping shadows.

But his instincts had not been wrong.

A dozen headhunters were clawing their way up the hill. When the flare ignited, they froze, staring up at it like it was the eye of their god that had just opened. They watched it with primitive fascination and Slaughter sighted them in and sprayed them down with the fifty. It was a turkey shoot. The slugs ripped them apart and sent their remains tumbling down the hill. He fired on suspicious pockets of darkness and anything that didn't move fast enough or things that looked like they *might* be alive. Most of them weren't, but the hammering of the heavy machine gun and the burning flare disoriented the other mutants, forcing them up out of ditches into the killzone and scattering the rest in fear. He took out sixteen or seventeen of them by his figuring.

When he was done, the barrel was smoking.

He sighed then, lit a cigarette, knowing there was no point in stealth by then. He kept his senses alert and his instincts sharp. "How did you come to be with the Red Hand?" he asked Maria.

"How does any woman come to be with them?"

"You didn't volunteer, I'm guessing."

Maria made a sound that was almost laughter. "No. Would any woman in her right mind volunteer to be a camp woman?"

"I suppose not."

“There are women who join them, though,” Maria admitted. “Some of them just want protection. But others join because they want to be part of the Hand. They want to fight.”

“But you weren’t one of them.”

“No, I wasn’t one of them.” She went silent for a moment, then: “They grabbed me and three other girls in Bismarck. We were making our way east like everyone else.”

“You were going to college when the Outbreak happened?”

“Yeah. I was studying comparative religion.”

“Heavy stuff.”

“Sure.”

She kept talking but he was no longer listening. He was getting that chill up his spine again. He knew someone, or more probably, some*thing* was sneaking up on the bunker. He listened. Intuited. Put out feelers hoping to snare something mentally, but whatever it was, it was being very quiet, very patient, something well-practiced in stealth and stalking. He thought about putting out another flare but he knew there was no time for that. He was getting a raw smell of rotting meat and old blood; nothing could disguise it.

It was getting thicker.

Hot, nauseating.

Maria had sensed it now, too. She had stopped talking.

Slaughter swallowed. Something was on top of the bunker working its way forward, inch by inch. The moonlight was very pale but there was enough of it to see by.

He waited.

A face and a trailing mop of hair appeared over the lip of the roof, then hands. They were perfectly silhouetted. Slaughter fired twice with the M-16, catching their intruder in the head. The headhunter made a gurgling sort of sound and dropped to the ground, dead.

But he was only the spearhead of a much larger force.

They saw no more reason for stealth.

Slaughter heard them grunting out there, gnashing their teeth and breathing hard. He put out a flare. Jesus, the hillside was swarming with them. They were crawling upwards on their bellies in shaggy ranks, their eyes glistening in the sudden intrusion of light.

He loaded the flare gun and put out another.

Loaded it again and stuck it inside his jean vest.

He opened up with the .50 cal. machine gun and killed twenty within the first five seconds of firing. But they were coming from every quarter. He laid down suppressive fire to the left and right, straight ahead and down below in the mud bowl. In the flickering light of the flare, it was a sea of gore down there, twitching limbs and blood and looped entrails and blasted heads. But they still kept coming, crawling right through the shattered remains of the others, painting themselves up with the blood of the fallen. Filthy, carrion-stinking, subhuman nightstalkers.

He kept shooting until the barrel was again hot and smoking.

But there were too many of them.

“We’re going to have to make a run for it!” he told Maria between shots, but she was hysterical and crying.

Two of them came out of the darkness, diving into the bunker. Slaughter was hit by something that knocked him on his ass. Maria screamed. His head filled with stars, he saw two hunched-over forms taking her out of the bunker. She fought and screamed in the orange glow of the flare, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. Their silhouettes were everywhere. They were hissing and growling and squealing like boars. The air was foul with the vile, musky scents of their pelts. He could smell their acrid urine, the pungent stench of their glandular secretions, the hot-blood smell of the meat they’d been chewing on. It was a concentration of death and graveyards that sickened him and made him want to vomit. This is what Hemingway had meant by death: the carrion breath of blood-drinking hags from a slaughterhouse.

He felt them grab his ankles, dragging him up and out of the bunker. He reached blindly for the M-16 and his hands closed around a flare magazine with five rounds in it. He stuffed it inside his vest as they pulled him out of the bunker and through the dirt. In the distance, he thought he heard Maria screaming.

Making himself go limp, he let them drag him down the path and out of the main body of headhunters. In the moonlight he could see the forms of the two that had his ankles. They were taking him somewhere private to feed upon him and take his head, no doubt.

Slaughter let that happen.

He didn’t want too many mutants around when he made his move. When they got him down to the next tier and within hailing distance of the hut, he reached a hand inside his vest and pulled out the flare gun. When he got a

clear silhouette and saw that the snarling simian bastards were shoulder to shoulder, he kicked out with his legs to get their attention. They dropped his ankles and turned to feed (he was thinking). He covered his eyes and put a flare right into the face of the one on the left who cried out in agony as it exploded in a shower of red sparks, lighting his hair on fire. The flare bounced off him and drilled into the other—a woman—burning across her breasts, bouncing off her legs and hitting the man again, this time in the groin.

Slaughter rolled away, scrambling off on his hands and knees.

They were screeching and growling, the man blinded, the woman seared, both of them burning now.

He made his getaway.

He ran off towards the hut but there were shapes moving all around him, so he cut down the hillside, avoided three or four more that shrieked at him, and ducked past still more. A throng of them came hobbling in his direction and more came from behind. He put a flare right into the throng and they vaulted away, screeching and burning, and he cut through them, trying to navigate in the flickering light. Then he tripped over something—a tree root, a half-buried bone, it was hard to tell—and went rolling down the hillside and found himself in the mud bowl.

There were dozens of them.

He ran and ran, found a ditch not far from the cage where he'd fought Maggot, and jumped in.

He listened to them for hours, killing and maiming, raping the women and dismembering the men, feeding on the wounded and chopping off heads. They didn't find him. They had plenty of prey and he bided his time, shivering in the muddy ditch, just praying for dawn, his ears ringing with the screams of their victims.

* * *

As inconceivable as it seemed, he must have fallen asleep at some point because when he opened his eyes it was silent. The sun was rising over the hills in the east in a red, shimmering ball, burning away a damp early morning mist.

For some time he laid there, afraid to move.

The encampments were silent.

Nothing moved.

Nothing stirred.

He carefully raised his head from the ditch. He saw nothing. The mutants were gone. A few vehicles were burning, casting plumes of smoke into the air, but that was about it. The headhunters had left with the rising sun.

Slaughter pulled himself out of the ditch, slicked with drying mud, face painted with grime. He saw a few headless Ratbag corpses that were badly mauled or eaten, but no dead mutants. They'd dragged off their dead along with the corpses of their prey. In fact, the area was very sterile in appearance. Not so much as a stray bone or a shank of meat. He saw bloodstains; they were everywhere. But there were no corpses save a few Ratbags sunken in the mud that had been overlooked. The headhunters were very efficient scavengers, apparently.

He pulled a cigarette out of the pocket of his vest and lit it.

He wondered about Maria. Poor kid was a mess, a real basket case, a collection of neuroses, but she'd been through a lot and that was understandable. He hoped they'd killed her. He honestly hoped for that because he didn't think any woman could remain sane after the *attentions* of those things.

He wanted to mourn her.

More so, he wanted to track the mutants to their lair with a hundred well-armed 1%ers and sort them out, but that was wish fulfillment and fantasy retribution. He had to be practical. He needed a vehicle. He needed to link up with the Disciples and, if that was impossible, to get to that fortress and get that bio out of there.

And don't forget Black Hat or Nemesis or Leviathan or whatever the fuck he calls himself. Because that puke has something special in store for you at the end of the trail and you know it.

He looked for a vehicle, but every one he found was wrecked. The Red Hand must have deserted during the night, those few survivors driving off in anything that ran. Slaughter was hoping for a Hummer or an APC, but he couldn't find so much as a skateboard. He was on foot. His scoot was back in Exodus and he really doubted it had survived the all-out attack by the Red Hand.

Damn.

On foot.

That was a hell of a thing for an old scooter tramp. He kept walking, keeping his eyes open for trouble and wondering how he was going to get out of this one and how far it might be to the nearest town where he could possibly hook up with a ride. He came closer to the main gate and he began to see a few stragglers roaming around. They ignored him. Even when he called out to them, they ignored him. They weren't interested in him or what he was selling. He wondered how many of them had been watching him dance with Maggot.

There was a row of clapboard buildings and that's where Slaughter had his first piece of luck of the day. The corpse of a man was impaled to the wall of one of the buildings. One of the mutants must have done it and it was a testament to the strength of those things. A knife had been driven through the belly of the corpse and into the wall, pegging it there.

The corpse belonged to Valdez.

And the knife belonged to Slaughter.

It was his Gurkha knife, his *Kukri.* He kind of doubted there was another one around so it had to be his. He took hold of the hilt with both hands and, bracing himself with one boot against the wall, worked the knife loose. The corpse hit the ground and he stared at the gored blade. The knife was no worse for wear. When he turned around, three or four stragglers were watching him.

When he put his eyes on them, they scattered.

All except one: a Ratbag with a .38 on his belt.

"You know where I can get a ride?" Slaughter asked him. "A car, a truck, anything?"

"No. But when you find one, you let me know."

He was about to turn away when there came a rumbling in the distance. Slaughter recognized what it was: there was no mistaking the roar of hogs, the sound of a pack coming in on their iron horses. The only thing akin to it was the sound of heavy armor riding in formation. It was thunder and blitzkrieg and sweet music, the banging of Thor's hammer and the echo of sheer wrath.

Problem was: who were the riders?

Slaughter couldn't see yet because of the bend in the road out there. If it was Cannibal Corpse, the stragglers were going to wish that the headhunters had got them the night before. But if it was the Corpse, then

Slaughter had already decided he was going to liberate one of those carrion-eaters of his ride.

The stragglers scattered.

They saw death coming and they weren't hanging around. They crawled back into their holes and coverts and made for the next round which would be no less bloody and savage than the first, they figured. Slaughter slipped around the side of the building, wondering how he was going to work this. He had the *Kukri* and the flare gun, but that was about it. Not exactly the sort of artillery needed to handle a crew of the Corpse Nation.

But he made ready.

He was going to make it work because he had to make it work. He saw the riders coming in: four of them and behind them another vehicle.

Couldn't be.

Couldn't possibly be.

But it was: the Devil's Disciples had arrived.

Chapter Twenty-Six

On the road again.

In the bright sunshine of a bright day, the War Wagon rolled on, moving steadily north-northwest up to Devil's Lake where the real action would begin. Slaughter slept away the morning and a good piece of the afternoon in the back of the Wagon after the exhilaration of forming up with his brother Disciples again had worn off. Up front, Apache Dan was driving, the others out riding their iron horses with Moondog leading the pack. Slaughter lay on his cot in the back looking at all the military surplus stacked up, smelling engine oil and gasoline, and thinking there wasn't a finer and more relaxing scent on earth. With what he'd gone through last night, he was starting to wind down and he was glad the Disciples had shown because it had really energized him to the task at hand and that was something he needed badly.

It had only been a few days since they were together last, but out here in the Deadlands a few days could be an awfully long time. In a few days you could meet a crazy old Indian barbecue king who could tell you wild tales about a Skeleton Man and you could trip your brains out on peyote and have visions and hold court with Black Hat and face down a town full of zombies only to be taken prisoner by the Red Hand and be forced to fight a giant wormboy only to barely escape a worm rain and hook up with a neurotic young woman who you began to feel protective of only to see her dragged off by mutants. And then there was always the bit about the woman squeezing out worms and becoming some kind of fucking seer. Yeah, a few days in the Deadlands could be like a lifetime of revelation and pain and horror.

He couldn't stop thinking about Maria and hoping she had died quickly, because he had felt responsible for her in her helplessness and felt that he had let her down.

You did the best you could do. Since you seem to be believing in karma these days, then you can believe that yours is intact and unsullied as far as Maria goes because you couldn't have done more.

According to Apache Dan, after Slaughter rode off that day, drawing the Red Hand away from the pack, they had gone to ground for hours, waiting it out in the shelter of some trees. After a time, Apache Dan had led Moondog and Shanks out on their bikes searching for him. They looked for hours but could find no sign of him and then, since Apache Dan was in charge, he did the only reasonable thing and resumed the drive up to Devil's Lake. None of them wanted to leave Slaughter behind but they figured if they would link up with him anywhere it would be up at their destination. When he wasn't there, they got down to business anyway and did some reconnaissance of the old NORAD fortress.

"It was worse than we thought," Apache Dan told him. "We were expecting to see it swarming with the Red Hand, but that's not what we saw at all."

"What did you see?" Slaughter asked him.

"Cannibal Corpse."

According to Apache at some point—fairly recently, he was guessing—the Corpse Nation had overrun the fortress compound and taken over.

It wasn't good news.

In fact, it was unbelievably bad news.

Apache Dan and Moondog had scouted out the perimeter of the place for some time and from their estimates there were at least forty or fifty members of the Corpse hanging around with more inside. And it looked like they were running themselves a flesh farm out back of the fortress. Somewhere in there, Slaughter knew, would be the bio. The Red Hand had been smart enough to keep her alive for a bargaining chip, but he doubted the same could be said of Cannibal Corpse. There was every likelihood she had either gone on the spit or become one of the walking dead by that point.

It would be no easy bit getting in there.

Finding her would take sheer luck.

And getting out with her in one piece would be akin to an act of God.

It was suicide from beginning to end but there was no backing out of it now. The thing was, even if Slaughter wanted to, the others wouldn't have it. They all wanted this and wanted it bad. They all wanted to charge in there, if for no other reason than to sort out Cannibal Corpse. To them,

Katherine Isley, the bio, was secondary. The woman really meant nothing to them. They wanted payback. They wanted to put an end to the Cannibal Corpse Nation once and for all.

And Slaughter understood that.

He felt that hatred as deeply as they did.

He had not forgotten about Coffin, the Kansas City chapter president of Cannibal Corpse, or his sergeant-at-arms, Reptile. They were responsible for murdering Disciples and Slaughter knew if he accomplished nothing else he would see the both of them hacked to pieces. When he was through with them, there wouldn't be enough *left* of them to get up and walk.

But all that aside, there was more on the burner here.

There were bigger things.

Things that involved Black Hat who, he now felt, was the undeads' god just as that zombie woman in Exodus was their death goddess. They would have to be put down. But if Black Hat was Nemesis and Nemesis was Leviathan, who quite conceivably was a demon of some sort or Death himself…what chance was there?

If you really believe these things and you've attained some higher state of consciousness where karma is not just a word but a physical/mystical flow of universal energy, and ethically and morally you've been taken up a few notches, then you have to know that going into the fortress with these boys means their death. They will not survive this and neither will you.

And that was it in a nutshell and he knew it.

Did he have a right to make these boys, his brothers, throw away their lives? He could tell himself they wanted to, but if he gave the word he knew that they would forget it and be more than happy to follow him on a road ride out to, say, the Pacific Ocean, fighting and raising hell the entire way. They'd like that. But he couldn't do that and if he backed down from Cannibal Corpse they might lose respect for him and he couldn't allow that. He had to follow this through because he knew it was his destiny to do so and he firmly believed this.

But six of them.

Six Devil's Disciples against an army of Cannibals, an army of nearly un-killable walking dead bikers. What were the chances?

"Live hard and die free," he said under his breath.

It was the mantra all 1%ers lived by. And when they stopped practicing it they were no longer 1%ers, they were no longer outlaw bikers.

Enough thinking.

Enough.

Slaughter went up front and clapped Apache Dan on the shoulder.

“Did you have a good sleep?”

“Yeah. I fucking needed it.”

“You did.”

“How far are we?”

“We should make Devil’s Lake just before sunset.”

It was all planned out and everyone knew their parts and Slaughter didn’t bother reiterating any of it in his head. Moondog had a special way in mind to breech the fortress and lay waste to most of the Cannibal Corpse wormboys at the same time. It would take daring and real guts, but Slaughter had no doubt that these boys were the ones for the job. He lit a cigarette and watched them out there—Jumbo and Shanks, Moondog and Fish. They were riding high and tight and as he watched them, feeling joy at seeing it and remorse knowing he would never see it again, in his mind he could see other road runs of the past where sixty or seventy Disciples rode in the pack and everything and every*one* got well out of their way.

“Can’t help thinking,” Apache Dan said then, “that you were real vague about the past few days.”

“Was I?”

“Sure. Let’s see. You took a wild ride with the Red Hand on your ass. You carved out through fields and back roads. Met an old Indian and ate some antelope. Fought some wormboys in a town called Exodus. Got taken by the Red Hand and fought some big wormboy and held your own against a mutant attack.”

“That about sizes it up,” Slaughter said, pulling off his cigarette.

“Sure. But seems to me you’re leaving out the in-betweens.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah. And I think we both know it.”

“What if I told you those in-betweens were the sort of thing you wouldn’t believe?”

Apache Dan laughed. “Listen to me, man. For twenty-odd years we been riding together, drinking together, fighting and whoring and raising hell together and wearing the same patch…you think I wouldn’t believe your word, my brother? You think there’s anyone in this world I trust more than

you? Have more faith in or more respect for? Any man I love more or wouldn't die for if you asked me to?"

Slaughter swallowed something down in his throat and thought about trying to bullshit the man but he knew he couldn't do it, so he told him everything and with the telling it sounded even worse than he thought it would.

When he was done, Apache Dan said, "Leviathan. Leviathan, man. Dig it. That's heavy shit. The Lord of the Dead. Goddamn."

"You still want to go through with this?"

Apache Dan smiled. "I want it more than ever, John. This is epic. This is the shit sagas are written about. If you're going to go out, I always say, then go out *big*. And what better way for a Disciple to cash-in than fighting the Devil himself?"

"You are one crazy mother," Slaughter told him.

"That's why I wear the patch, my brother. Because I earned the right."

* * *

As the sun set, they were sitting on a grassy hilltop beneath the cover of some trees scoping out the NORAD complex below which looked like the castle of a witch in some evil fairy tale. The place was much as Brightman had described it: three stories of gray concrete, drab and deathly and utilitarian. Boxlike with a flat roof and rectangular windows, all of which were covered in steel mesh. The compound surrounding it was faced off by a circular drive and a huge parking lot that was now cracked open with sprouting weeds. There was a courtyard of high yellow grasses that stretched out about three hundred feet in every direction until it reached a high chainlink fence topped with razor wire. The road leading up to the main gate was long and straight and set out with lots of abandoned guard shacks. With his binoculars, Slaughter could see where the tire traps had been—sheaths of spikes that would rise up out of the road at intervals to snag any vehicle that tried to make a run at the complex. He could also see obvious scars in the landscape outside the main fence where a series of fences had been taken out after the complex closed up shop. At one time, the fences would have held dog runs in-between with vicious German Shepherds that would have stopped anybody from even getting close to the place. Back in the 1950's and 1960's and probably right up into the 1980's,

if you would have been even as close as they were on the hilltop you would have been arrested by MPs and tossed in a military prison. It had been secure during the Cold War, but now it was wide open.

The main gate was thrown wide and why not? Cannibal Corpse feared no one. And who in their right mind would willingly go through those gates into a nest of flesh-eaters?

Only the Devil's Disciples, he thought.

"You can't see the flesh farm from here," Apache Dan said. "It's out back behind the place."

Slaughter could see a rising rock wall back there and Apache said there was a high cave in it that was not natural but hewn-out and must have held some kind of top security facility in the NORAD days.

"From what I could see of it when Moondog and me scoped it from the other side, it looks big enough to drive three or four tanks into at the same time. Hard to say what was in there or what's in there now. Might have been a bunker or a bomb shelter. Who knows?"

"But that's probably where our bio will be if she's anywhere."

"That's what we think."

Sitting there, Slaughter saw the ratbikes of the Cannibals parked in the lot, in the drive, on the grass. They were everywhere. He counted fifty-seven of them so that meant they had at least fifty-seven members of the Nation to deal with. Not good odds for six men, even if they were hard-charging bullet-eating members of the Devil's Disciples Nation.

He thought over the plan Moondog had come up with. As warlord and sergeant-at-arms and a combat veteran, his plan was good. It was workable. But it was full of holes and that wasn't poor planning or strategy, but the fact that with six men there was only so much that could be foreseen and mapped out. A good part of it was going to be the element of surprise combined with luck.

Slaughter had been over it from start to finish a dozen times at least and he honestly couldn't come up with anything better.

Parked in the lot amongst the ratbikes were the vehicles of the Red Hand —APCs, Hummers, and pickup trucks. If all went successful, they'd be charging out of there in a pair of APCs. Once they started rolling, with their weapons systems and heavy armaments, nothing could stop them.

If they could get to that part of things, and it wouldn't be easy.

Slaughter stood up. He saw maybe a dozen Cannibals moving around down there, shambling about as their kind did. Inside the fortress, he thought, was where Reptile and Coffin would be if they were still in fact walking.

“I guess that about does it,” he said.

“I guess so, man. Now we wait for dark.”

Slaughter nodded, feeling his blood running hot. “Then we get it on.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Slaughter waited for it to begin because it was only minutes away now and he knew it. He could feel the excitement—and dread—coming right up from the balls of his feet as he waited in the darkness on Moondog's Boss Hoss 375 Horse. It was like energy was funneling up from deep inside the earth and his feet on the ground were plugged right into it.

Moondog was in the bus and it was starting to roll.

Slaughter and the others waited on their bikes. They carried the arsenal Brightman had supplied them with: 12-gauge pistol-gripped Mossberg pump shotguns, white phosphorus grenades, and Hardballer .45s. Full auto weapons like the M-16 wouldn't do much good against wormboys, you needed real punch for clean headshots.

Slaughter lit a cigarette, watching the bus picking up speed as it made for the gates. There were about twenty Cannibals out in front of the fortress gathered with their ratbikes and there would be twenty less of them once Moondog made contact. He had rigged a pressure switch to the cow-catcher on the front of the War Wagon that was wired to two-hundred pounds of C-4. When he got within fifty-feet of the fortress he would dive out the door.

Things were about to get loud.

The other Devil's Disciples were waiting out at the end of the drive that led into the compound.

The War Wagon passed through the gates.

Moondog turned the headlights on.

The Disciples fired up their scoots and made ready.

It was only a matter of seconds now before the fireworks began. Every man was tense and exhilarated, pumped-up and ready to roll. And then they heard it—WHUMP, WHUMP, *WHUMP-WHUMP!* The War Wagon went up like a dying sun, shooting out a barrage of fire and clouds of rolling black smoke. The first two explosions were the C-4 loads going, the second

two were the twin fuel tanks. And now the front of the fortress was a blazing firestorm. The Cannibal Corpse wormboys in front were either blasted into fragments or lit up like napalm. Even from their distance—two city blocks away—the Disciples felt the shock wave and the heat that followed it.

There was the diversion, time to ride into hell.

“THE SHIT IS ON!” Slaughter cried out and the Disciples rode in hell-for-leather, whooping and hollering, shouting their rebel yells.

As Slaughter opened the throttle and led the pack in, he could see wormboys staggering around on fire. Many more were on the ground in burning pieces.

Slaughter came firing through the gates and a dazed wormboy came out to meet him, his face like an open infected wound, his hair smoking. Slaughter roared right at him and gave him a round from the Mossberg that took his head right off. Apache Dan fired into a group of three or four, scattering them.

With the blazing remains of the War Wagon and the burning ratbikes of the Cannibals, it was like daylight in the front of the fortress. The blast had blown open the doors and taken a huge bite out of the concrete wall. Inside, the flames were spreading as more wormboys stumbled out, patting themselves wildly to put out the fires that licked at them.

What worried Slaughter at that moment was that he did not see Moondog anywhere. He should have been in the grass, coming out to meet them. But he was nowhere and that gave Slaughter a very bad feeling.

But there was no time.

He led the pack around the side of the fortress and as they roared out of its moonlit shadow they saw the rising rock wall and the mouth of the immense cave hewn into it. There was no missing it. A paved road led from the fortress to the cave and it was lit on either side by smoldering torches that threw a shifting, dirty orange illumination.

But the stink.

That godawful stink.

Slaughter knew by then what he was going to see even before he saw it: corpses. Just like in Victoria, dozens of people had been impaled on sharpened stakes driven into the ground and lit on fire. They burned with a constant guttering like corpsefat candles and he figured they had been soaked in oil or something similar so they would burn on and on.

It was a ghoulish ride down that road with the human torches blazing and blackened and stinking to either side. When they reached the mouth of the cave, they ditched their bikes and went in.

It was immense inside and lit by more human torches.

In the silence they could hear them sputtering and sizzling, dripping globs of hot fat. The floor of the cave was dirt and it was littered with gnawed bones, bits of flesh and tissue, maggoty heads, and great splotches of blood. It was a dining hall for the Cannibals and what made it even worse was that to either wall, prisoners were shackled together like slaves. There were dozens of them and they were all terrified or completely out of their minds. Some called out to the Disciples but many more just stared off into space. They were citizens, Slaughter saw, many innocents and many more members of the Red Hand.

And they were made to watch as the wormboys had their nightly feast, knowing that each day more of them would be slaughtered for food.

All the Disciples wanted to go to them but they had other concerns right then: a group of Cannibals were feeding on the remains of a woman. Such was their gluttony and the need to fill those empty spaces below that they paid no attention whatsoever that their hated rivals had appeared.

Jumbo made to open up on them but Slaughter held up his hand.

Not yet.

This was too easy.

The wormboys were wearing their colors, which by that point were saturated with corpse goo and cemetery slime, stained by dozens of ghoulish feasts, feathered with rot and mildew. One of the Cannibals, gore dripping from his cankerous mouth, looked over at the Disciples, watching them with fish-white eyes as he chewed ravenously.

He made a grunting noise, but that was about it.

The others were even less interested than he.

The hunger of the worms that inhabited them was such that simple survival mechanisms of defense and attack were overridden in the need to shove meat into their mouths. They were fixated on the corpse of the woman who not too long ago, Slaughter guessed, had been shackled to the walls with the others. They tore at her, snapped at each other, pulling limbs free and yanking at what they found inside her open belly.

The Devil’s Disciples waited no more.

They opened up and dropped all four Cannibals into the gore of their meal.

“Watch out!” someone yelled.

And that’s when Slaughter saw the others coming at them. Not three or four, but fifteen or twenty Cannibals carrying chains and hatchets and skinning knives.

* * *

The wormboys burst out of the darkness at the rear of the cave, and if their dead compatriots had no longer felt the hate for the rival club, they certainly did, and they planned on doing something about it.

Slaughter watched them come on, letting them get within killing range of the shotguns, his brother Disciples at his side, spaced evenly as they did when taking on a rival gang.

Slaughter, at that moment, felt more alive than he had in days, if not weeks. Because when you were a 1%er this is what it was about. Nothing like a good turf battle or blood war to remind you what it was to be alive again…even if your adversaries weren’t strictly human or strictly even living things as such.

“Grenade?” Apache Dan said.

But Slaughter shook his head. “Not with all these people in here. Can’t risk it.”

The dead came on.

The Devil’s Disciples faced them.

When they got in range, Slaughter and his boys opened up with their shotguns and within five seconds, eight of the Cannibals were down with heads blown to confetti. And then it got close in and personal, the way the Disciples liked it. They were outnumbered by the deathless horrors but that had never stopped them before and it did not stop them now. Ten wormboys converged on the five of them and they went at it, shooting when they could, using their guns as clubs, hitting and kicking, avoiding chains and hatchets, pulling knives and using them.

Slaughter had no time to watch out for his brothers because his own skin was in danger and he was fighting tooth and claw with his Gurkha knife, the shotgun tossed aside now. He ducked under a chain and took out the throat of a Cannibal Corpse with one swing and decapitated another with a

second. A chain snapped against his back, throwing him forward into a pair of wormboys who tried to get a hold of him so they could use their teeth. But Slaughter was a greased eel, twisting and sliding, nearly boneless as he fought against them. The Cannibal Corpse with the chain swung it again and he dipped under it, the chain shattering the face of one of his tormentors.

Then the one with the chain took hold of him in a bear hug from behind, lifting him up in a squeezing killing embrace.

Slaughter allowed it.

He let the wormboy lift him into the air and when he did, Slaughter kicked the second zombie in the chest, flattening him, and brought the *Kukri* down in a savage arc, sinking it into the knee of the one that held him.

Then he was free, the wormboy hobbled, and he took his head off with one vicious and powerful swing of the blade.

He saw Shanks go down fighting in a crowd of five Cannibals and he ran in their direction, swinging the *Kukri* like a farmer scything wheat. The zombies fell like trees. He hacked, stabbed, pivoted, ducked, hacked and hacked again. Then something hit him in the face. Not hard enough to draw blood but with enough force to make him lose his footing and trip over the crawling remains he had just made.

Slaughter rolled through them.

He saw Shanks get up.

He saw him smile crookedly, blood spattered over his face and then a wormboy—one that was fast and surprisingly lithe—jumped through the fighting bodies and brought his hatchet down clean into the crown of Shanks' head.

Shanks went down, still wearing the same goofy smile.

"MOTHERFUCKER!" Slaughter shouted and then a strength that was pure hate and pure adrenalin rippled through him like high voltage and he fought through the remains, finding his knees, then his feet, kicking and hacking, and going after the zombie that had put Shanks down.

Not a gang fight anymore.

Not just bloodsport.

Now it was personal.

He knocked a wormboy aside and the one with the hatchet whose face was mottled blue and black came to meet him. He swung the hatchet

forehand and backhand, the strokes powerful and devastating. Slaughter barely got out of the way. But as he did, he swung the Gurkha knife and sliced nearly a pound of meat from the wormboy's left forearm.

Being a zombie, the wound didn't bother the Cannibal Corpse much. It was more of a surprise and a minor inconvenience than anything else.

He looked at his arm.

Then he looked at Slaughter.

He grinned and black bile poured from his mouth in a bubbly foam. He swung the hatchet. Slaughter swung the *Kukri*. The blades met in midair, clanging and throwing sparks. The impact stopped both man and zombie, made them stagger back a bit and reassess the prowess of their adversaries.

But if the wormboy Cannibal Corpse was hesitant to engage again, Slaughter was not. For in his mind he saw this walking carrion taking down Shanks, a brother Disciple, and that's all it took. Letting out a war cry, he went right at the wormboy, slashing and cutting with a ferocity that made the zombie stumble back, but not before Slaughter took his hand off at the wrist and his other arm at the elbow. Then the wormboy stumbled about almost comically and Slaughter went at him again, a voice in his head saying, *it's only a flesh wound*, and then he split the zombie's face open and was splattered with his gore.

The zombie went down, his attendant worm sliding out of his bisected skull.

Three more Cannibals came at Slaughter with chains.

He dove away from them and brought up his Mossberg, blowing the head off one and wiping the face off another. The third swung his chain and it connected with Slaughter's left arm in a blazing white-hot explosion of pain that dropped him and he lost the shotgun.

Maybe it would have been over then but Apache Dan, smeared with gore and crying out in the voices of his Shawnee ancestors, came bounding in and sank one of the Cannibal's own bloodied hatchets into the head of the zombie, dropping him. Apache didn't stop until that head was so much hamburger spread over the floor.

And that's when the others scattered.

Slaughter pulled himself up, grabbing his Mossberg and his Gurkha knife.

Only three of the ten were left but they were moving off deeper into the cave as if summoned.

Shanks was dead, Jumbo and Apache Dan and Fish were badly battered but alive.

In the rear of the cave, more torches were lit, more human candles, and Slaughter knew without a doubt they hadn't been lit by accident. It was an invitation. They wanted him and the other Disciples to follow them and this is exactly what they did even though the prisoners against the walls cried out for them not to go any further.

Drawn to the flickering torches, smelling the greasy vile stench of roasting human flesh, Slaughter led the Disciples deeper into the cave and what waited there.

* * *

Maybe he should have known it was a mistake.

Maybe he should have known it was some kind of trap.

And maybe he should have practiced some restraint and common sense. But he was too amped up by that point, mainlining death and hate, his belly a boiling mass of need for retribution. He wanted to kill every last Cannibal Corpse he could find until the trail of mutilated cadavers led him to the ones he wanted most of all: Reptile and Coffin.

I'll go to my grave, I'll crawl through the foulest fucking tracts of hell to get them, he thought. *To sort them out proper and see their heads hanging in the wind where I'll anoint them with my piss.*

The flickering human torches were not in the same chamber. An archway —artificial like everything else in there—led into a sister chamber that was much smaller than the first and if they thought it smelled bad where they were, the stink in here was absolutely toxic. It was like greening meat shoved up their noses and corpse-worms slicked freshly with the drainage of dead men twisting on their tongues. It was so raw and savage and unbelievably violent it nearly put them to their knees.

Apache Dan and Fish stood there, trembling.

It was only Slaughter that stepped forward. This chamber was the real flesh farm, the other was more of a stockyard. This was where the stunning and cutting and rendering came down, this was the abattoir where human meat was processed. This was the corpse factory.

Fish, is what Slaughter thought as he got a good look. *Like a fucking fish cannery.*

Which was something he knew about because he'd worked at one long ago one summer. Except it wasn't fish, of course, but humans. They were netted and brought here to be cleaned. Dozens of them were hanging from the ceiling by the feet, each of them ghastly white and thoroughly hollowed. Heads were speared on sharpened dowels and arranged in great racks upon the walls. Corpses, in whole, were pressed like witches beneath slabs of stone until their intestines burst from their asses and mouths. Most of it was old death, three or four days, a fine and putrescent vintage, slimy and rotten and falling apart, carpeted in ants and beetles and noodly pockets of worms. A great number of victims were held immobile by the throats in something like wooden stocks, the tops of their heads sawn off, the brains either missing or decayed to a soft gray pulp. Along one of the walls, hearts—at least thirty or forty of them—had been speared with knitting needles and driven into corkboards. Eyes were secreted into jars like kernels of corn for proper aging.

Children were skinned and heaped in red piles.

Women had been violated with pitchforks.

Men were strung by nooses of their own viscera.

It was all appalling, but what was even worse and nearly inconceivable to the sane mind were the vats of creamy oil that held living humans with mad staring eyes glazed like windows. They were huge, bloated, greasy with oil and lubricated with their own septic foulness, fattened calves that were soaked in seasoned brine like rare cuts of meat or exotic pickles, allowed to absorb the fatty excretions until they swelled up into soft, tasty shanks of delicate sweetmeat for the palettes of discerning ghouls.

Slaughter had to look away, for the insanity etched into those fly-specked faces was simply too much. But everywhere there was more and more and more until he was so utterly physically ill he had to cough out a tangle of bile, steadying himself by momentarily dropping his shotgun and placing one gore-speckled, shaking hand on a barrel. There were many barrels and all of them were packed with human organs and human meat, floating in sharp-smelling serums.

He grabbed up his shotgun, breathing in the dank rot and exhaling.

There were maybe seven or eight wormboys in there, but they were almost pedestrian compared to the thing that sat in an altar chair of knotted human bone high above all else, three prostrate and shivering boys kneeling at her feet. When Slaughter saw her, he knew who she was. This was the

death-goddess, as he had called her, from Exodus. The one that had pointed at him and gotten inside his mind for those few brief moments before the Red Hand rolled in.

Here she was now, looking down at him.

She wore the fresh and bloody skins of slain children over veils of mold-specked spiderweb silk, scarves of human bowels lovingly wrapped around her throat. Over her head was the same tanned mask of the hag she had worn the last time. He could see her mouth, the puckered lips, the gloss-black fangs awaiting something to tear.

"How does thee fare, biker boy?"

It was a voice he knew. At first it was that of Black Hat, scraping and dry and worn like bones in a catacomb rubbing together, but gradually it became another voice and he tried to place it but his thoughts scurried madly in his skull. They could find neither common ground nor cohesion.

"Who are you?" he heard himself say.

"Who exactly, biker boy?"

She stood now and the veils parted so he could see, yet again, her porcelain-white belly with its black autopsy stitching running from pubis to breast, the symbolic signature of Leviathan burned deep into the flesh. Her vulva was engorged and teeming with parasites. Gouts of black menstrual blood dripped from between her thighs. He knew her voice, he knew it well. But all his mind could see was the death goddess, the consort of Leviathan, the zombie witch, the black Madonna who gave birth to children that she in turn fed upon and skinned. These were the stark and haunting images in his mind.

But he had to remember.

Remember.

And, yes, of course, then he knew. He saw himself in New Castle after those shit-eating cops had gunned down Neb and he himself had returned the favor with the MAC-10. Word had reached him that Neb's old lady, Indiana, had dimed them, turned evidence on them to the police to avoid another drug-related conviction. For days Slaughter had hunted her, the only thing keeping him going was the all-pervading, all-filling, all-nourishing hatred and need for revenge. He tracked her like a stalking cat. He followed her to a bar. Sometime after midnight she came out with some drunken scooter tramp and Slaughter slipped out of the shadows.

The tramp said, "Wha—"

Slaughter punched him in the face and kneed him in the groin. When he went down in the gravel lot, Slaughter kicked him in the ribs and booted him in the head until his eyes rolled back white.

Then it was just him and Indiana.

Why she hadn't run he didn't know.

She waited there. In fact, she went down on her knees and begged him for mercy, that it wasn't her or if it was then the cops had forced her to do it.

Slaughter took her by the hair and yanked her to her feet. His face inches from her own, he said, quite calmly, "You fucking skank. You fucking whore. You fucking grubbing dirty little cunt. Neb. They killed fucking Neb and you're the rotten fucking cunt who put them onto him."

She was crying and shaking, but all her little girl tears were wasted on Slaughter's stony demeanor.

"Oh please, oh God…John, please, John, don't kill me," she whimpered. "Oh please, John, please please please…"

"Here's your please," he told her, the knife in his hand. "Here it is for you, you fucking cunt."

He sank the blade to the hilt into her belly and she gasped at the violation of cold steel. Then, still holding her head by the hair so that her face was but inches from his own, he pulled the knife right up to her sternum, gutting the hog and dropping her, leaving her to die in her own pooling blood and bowels.

That's what he had done to her, that fucking rat.

Indiana.

Indiana…

So now he knew. Indiana. Goddamn Indiana.

"You," he said.

Her mask was stripped away and dispensed with now and he looked at her fissured corpse-face that was like the root of a dead tree. The boys before her stood—lambs to slaughter, offerings of meat—and she flayed them with her black thorny nails. Like scalpels, they sheared the skins of the boys free and then gutted them in turn, eviscerating them as Slaughter had once done to her. Before they dropped at her feet, those nimble white fingers pulled an offering from each of them: their still beating hearts. Then, each in turn, her lacquered black fangs bit into them, mouth spilling candy-red sauce, biting and ripping at them, engorging the pink-muscled masses nearly whole.

Sacrifice had been taken.

Slaughter vaguely heard Apache Dan and Fish call to him, but he was transfixed by the atrocity he witnessed, and maybe equally by Indiana's bile-yellow eyes that swam with maggots, the scarab beetles that poured from the skullish cavern of her nose, and the bulimic gush of vomited human meat she spat at his feet.

Hissing like a serpent, she said, *"I am become death, the devourer of worlds."*

The words of Lord Shiva, the Hindu death god, in the *Bagavad Gita*, Slaughter knew, but never had it been so appropriate, so fitting, and so very prophetic.

As she descended from her throne of human bone, Slaughter did not back away from her. No, he waited for her and maybe in some psychic realm of his mind he went to her as fast. His brain was rioting with conflicting emotions—rage, terror, disgust, and maybe even pity. For maybe it was another sparkling and impossibly lucid Zen moment, but he saw very clearly himself killing Indiana and knowing it was ugly and brutal and very wrong in the human sense of things, but resurrecting her like this as wormgirl incarnate, the Queen of the Dead, Dark Maiden of Destruction, Extermination, and Necrotic Dissolution, Mistress of Dank Tombs and Graveyard Rats…it was an atrocity and one, he knew, he had played a hand in.

As he raised the Mossberg, he wanted to shout, to cry out something melodramatically Hollywood like, *Die you evil cunt* or *Back to hell where you belong* but there were no words extant that could encompass what was in his brain so he simply opened up on her, blasting her into writhing fragments until the shotgun was empty. But as he reloaded and fired again, he saw something that he would never have believed. If the identity of the death goddess as Indiana was the first revelation then here was the second: although she was blown apart in fleshly corruption, she did not stay apart. As he killed her, she was reborn; as he unmade her, she was remade; as he atomized her remains she reparticulated.

She was deathless, eternal, immortal.

He killed her again and again. Each time she exploded into a storm of tissue, blood mist, and winging white deathshead moths only to be reanimated and remade in a fleshstorm of corpse ropes, blood trains, scab and suture, creeping beetle and squirming maggot, all coming together and

pressing out another copy of her like hot plastic formed in a mold. And then she would be standing there with glaring yellow eyes of leprosy and a toothy grin of charnel delight, things dropping from her, things squirming in and out of her, fetal cemetery rats pushing from her flesh and sprouting greasy hair and rabid teeth and glaring red rodent eyes. Like her, they reformed and fleshed out.

Again, Slaughter destroyed her and again she became a steaming, smoking fleshshow of liquid polymer that sought and found the same form again and again.

But by then—and it had probably only been seconds since he'd killed her the first time—Fish and Apache Dan were with him and all three of them stood there like the Magnificent Seven minus four, blasting away at the death goddess until she fell apart and came back together in a whirling storm of graveyard waste. They put her down and she stood back up. They kept shooting until their weapons were hot and smoking in their fists and that's when Fish totally lost control. Because it had been too much for him for a long time now. The spider-things in the mist had unhinged him as had the sporing mutants and now, his shotgun empty, he went into a blind, hating rage and charged the death goddess with his Mossberg held like a club.

He went at her, swinging.

Slaughter heard his own voice cry out in desperation.

But too late.

The death goddess had already accepted Fish as an offering.

In a whirlwind hallucinogenic eruption of writhing white limbs, she embraced him, pulling him into her and crushing him until his bones popped like bubble wrap and red mush spurted from his mouth and she chortled with obscene laughter, blowing out a hot sulfuric steam that was acrid and burning.

Apache Dan shouted and Slaughter hooked him by the arm and pulled him away, taking out a white phosphorus grenade from his ammo sack, pulling the pin, counting the seconds, and then tossing it at her. And as he did so, he threw himself and Apache into the dirt and there was a resounding explosion, an outpouring of heat and acrid smoke…and as they looked backward, the death goddess was caught in a hot-white blazing firestorm that spread out, lighting up the hanging bodies and seeking dry tinder at every quarter.

She screamed.

She laughed.

She sobbed.

She cried out at Slaughter the way she had the first time she died.

But in the end, she collapsed into herself, burning and popping, throwing out gouts of flame and greasy curls of black smoke as she was incinerated and cremated into drifting black ash.

They lobbed two more WP grenades into that slaughterhouse so all would burn, all would be cleansed by fire, and all would go to ash.

Then, coughing and gagging, they stumbled off into the other chamber.

* * *

Jumbo was waiting for them. He was carrying the corpse of Shanks who looked like some bloody, slit, and broken ragdoll. “Fish?” he said.

“He’s gone,” Apache Dan told him and said no more.

They brought Shanks outside and laid him in the grass. There was no service, nothing but thoughts and remembrance. There was time for little else. Then, heeding the cries of the prisoners, they moved methodically from one to the other cutting the leather thongs that bound their wrists. Most were on their feet immediately if somewhat unsteadily. Others never lost the glazed look in their eyes. They had to be pushed along by the healthier, saner ones towards the opening.

Slaughter kept asking them the same question again and again: “Which one of you is Katherine Isley?”

He got no responses and that only deepened his dread.

The three Disciples got the prisoners out of the cave and into the relatively fresh air of the night.

“Get out of here,” Slaughter told them. “Go back where you came from or grab a vehicle out front. But go! Just go!”

They need no further urging. They moved off into the night, all except for one young boy who said, “You’re looking for Kathy Isley?”

“Yes.”

He pointed towards the fortress looming in the night. “Colonel Krigg was keeping her in there.” Then the kid ran off.

Krigg was the leader of the Red Hand. Slaughter figured he was probably dead by now and maybe the bio, too, but he had to go look. Much

as he hated to, he had to go into that fucking mausoleum.

“Jumbo,” he said as they climbed on their hogs. “Get out front. See if you can find Moondog. Get us an APC. Whatever you can find. When we come out, we’re going to be in a hurry.”

Jumbo fired up his Panhead and roared off into the night.

“You sure you wanna go in there with me?” Slaughter asked Apache Dan as they reloaded their pump shotguns.

He just laughed. “Quit with the stupid fucking questions, John.”

Together, side by side, they rode off towards the fortress.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

There was only one way in and they took it: right through the front doors which had now been nicely widened by the explosion of the War Wagon which was still burning…what was left of it. They rode their bikes right through curtains of flame and funneling smoke until they got clear of it in a corridor.

“Goddamn place is going up, John.”

“We better be quick then.”

Other than the flames, the fortress was shadowy. They pulled out tactical flashlights from their ammo bags (noticing with some unease that they had no shells left, only a couple of grenades) and bracketed them to the barrels of their shotguns. They clicked them on and started hunting. The place was immense and they went room to room to room and, other than a few Cannibal Corpse zombies they killed, they found nothing. Just offices and storerooms and emptiness. From what they could see, the first floor was untouched.

So they climbed the stairs to the second.

More corridors, a labyrinthine maze of them in fact. Many doors were locked. They saw no wormboys and from the screaming they heard outside and the occasional gunfire—Jumbo, no doubt, and hopefully Moondog—the wormboys were probably in hot pursuit of the prisoners which provided a diversion, even if an unwanted one.

They kept scouting around and downstairs they heard rumbling sounds like explosions. Slaughter didn’t think it was ordinance at all, but the fire spreading, finding new rooms to engulf. Things were getting hairy and time was running out and where in the fuck was the bio?

He kept thinking about his brother and that brought to mind Brightman. The two were connected and he wondered, really wondered, how much he could trust that spook.

And what choice do you have? he asked himself. *Honestly, ultimately, what choice do you really have? All you can do is keep your word and get the bio. It's called dealing in good faith. And right now, that's about all you have. Faith.*

Funny. But as he poked his nose into room after room, he heard a voice in the back of his mind praying to God that he could find the woman, get her out, get what remained of his brothers away from this place in one piece. He felt hypocritical. Absolutely hypocritical. When he was a kid, he thought maybe he believed in God. Before Catholic school had destroyed his faith. But for a time, he thought he had. Part of him in these last desperate hours wanted to reconnect with that but it just wasn't there. Yet, in the back of his brain, that voice kept praying and wasn't that just amazing? Wasn't that a wonderful comment on the human species?

In the beams of the flashlights, dust motes swam like pillow down, drifting and floating. And it was the dust itself that guided them. Certain corridors had an undisturbed layer of it and others had trails pounded through it.

More rumbling from below.

A couple of them shook the fortress.

"John…" Apache Dan started to say.

"I know, man. Just a few more minutes and we're out."

They came to yet another corridor and by then they were so mixed up and turned around that Slaughter had to wonder if they'd ever find their way back out even if they did locate Isley. The corridor had been well-trod, judging from the dust. It had possibilities. Unfortunately, it was almost as long as a city block.

"All right," he said, feeling hope fading in him. "We check the rooms and then we're out."

"You take this side, I'll take the other."

Slaughter didn't like separating, but what choice was there? Time was a factor now and they had to move it and get it done. He checked three rooms, coughing on the dust he stirred up. Three more. A fourth. Then a fifth. Then—

He threw open the door and was looking into an empty room except it wasn't empty because there were three people in there: two women and a man he recognized: Brightman. They were tied to a bench. One of the women was clearly dead.

He blinked again and again because he really thought he was seeing things. He panned the light over them.

"Jesus Christ, you finally made it," Brightman said.

"I told you I would." Slaughter set his shotgun aside and lit a cigarette. "What're you doing here?"

Brightman stared at him with shining eyes set in a grimy face. "The Red Hand. They attacked the base and overran us. They took me as…as a bargaining chip, I suppose. Now cut me loose."

"Not so fast. Where's Isley?"

"She's sitting next to me. Now cut me loose."

Slaughter ignored him. Just as in their first meeting, he got a bad feeling from this guy. He turned to the door and shouted out into the corridor: "Apache! Down here!"

Then he went back into the room. "They brought you here?"

"Yes…then those bikers, they took over the place and slaughtered the Red Hand. Now cut—"

"How come they didn't take you into the cave?"

"What cave?"

Slaughter didn't push that. He let Brightman talk. Apparently, after Cannibal Corpse stormed the place, Brightman and Isley and the other woman—who apparently had been some sort of assistant to Isley and was now quite dead—were shuttered away up here. They hadn't eaten in days. They were starving. Dehydrated. Isley was dying.

"Now can we shitcan the questions, Slaughter, and get me loose?"

Slaughter blew out smoke. "Way I'm figuring it, I don't need you. I just need the woman."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Brightman asked him. "You need *me*. She's dying. She'll do you no good. If I can get on a radio I can have your brother's sentence commuted and I can get a chopper in here to get us out. But we have to move. We really have to move because I'm pretty sure this place is going to be leveled by an airstrike and I'm surprised it hasn't been already."

"I want my brother freed."

"Cut me loose and get me to a radio and it's done."

That's when Isley lifted her head up. In the flashlight beam, her face was yellow, jaundiced-looking. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused. "Your brother is dead," she said in a perfectly lucid voice.

“She’s out of her fucking head!” Brightman insisted. “Now cut me loose before this goddamn place gets bombed!”

But Slaughter wasn’t about to do that. *Red Eye was dead? Dead? Is that what she said? Is that really what she just fucking said?* He swallowed and then swallowed again. He pulled off his cigarette and tried to keep his cool.

“How do you know that?” he asked her.

“Slaughter! She’s out of her head! Please, *goddammit,* cut me loose!”

But Slaughter ignored him. He focused on the woman. She put her eyes on him and he didn’t like them at all because they reminded him of the eyes of the woman at the Red Hand encampment that had been shooting worm juice.

“Your brother’s name was Perry. People called him Red Eye,” she said in her gravelly voice. “Brightman told you if you got me out of here, your brother would be freed but your brother was already dead and he knew it.”

Slaughter looked at Brightman now.

But Brightman shook his head. “Jesus Christ, Slaughter, she’s got a worm in her. You can’t believe what she’s saying. C’mon, just cut me loose and I’ll get your brother freed. You have to trust me.”

But why did Slaughter feel like that was the one thing he could never do? He looked back at the woman. Yeah, she was in a bad way and he had no doubt that she *did* have a worm in her. He knew the look they got once they were infected. But he knew something else, too. That junkie back at the encampment had started talking about things she couldn’t possibly know and he had seen the infected do the same thing to one degree or another as they slipped into the coma that led to death…and resurrection.

“Your brother was dead from the first. He was executed in Chicago. Brightman knew it. They sent you here to die because they had to send someone.”

“Listen, Slaughter—” Brightman started to say, but Slaughter cuffed him in the mouth to shut him up. He wanted to hear what this lady had to say. He had come an awfully long way and through some very nasty territory to hear her words.

So he asked her questions and she answered them. Sometimes she went off on crazy tangents, but mostly her words had the ring of truth. She said that there were basically two factions out east fighting for control of the central government: those who wanted a cure from the infesting worms and those who were afraid of the same. The second group was afraid because

they knew what caused the worm rains in the first place and if the truth came out—say if Katherine Isley for example made it back east and told all that she knew, which was considerable—they would be held responsible for what had happened to the country and probably be tried for treason and war crimes at the very least.

“And what did cause them? The worms?” he asked. Brightman looked like he was going to open his mouth and Slaughter gave him a hard look that shut him up.

Isley’s eyes rolled in her head a moment, then focused…somewhat. “It was called the Proteus Experiment: a biological weapons program that got out of control. It proved to be self-perpetuating. After the worm larva was set loose experimentally, it was found that it could not be contained.”

“And you?”

“I was brought in to seek a cure of sorts,” she admitted. “What I came up with was a synthetic virus. Then things happened. I think you know the story. I ended up here.”

Slaughter sighed and ground his cigarette out under his boot. “I don’t get it. Why the charade? If they wanted me dead why didn’t they put a bullet in my head?”

Isley told him to remember the two factions: those who did not know and those who did. The first group knew what Isley had been working on with the CDC, they knew about the mathematical model for the virus. They wanted her found and brought back. The reality of the situation was the armed forces—special ops and commandos—that could pull off such an operation were stretched pretty thin as it was. But the first group demanded. The second group could not admit their culpability, but at the same time they had to play along with the first group. To do anything less would have been inhumane and immoral. That’s when Brightman, who was CIA, and his think tank came up with the perfect solution…especially when a report came across his desk about a renegade biker named John Slaughter who had killed a couple of cops and was heading ever west. They’d grab Slaughter, free his boys from lockup, send them on a mission they couldn’t possibly complete (it was thought) and then no one could say a rescue hadn’t been attempted. Of course, the people back east would be told it was a highly-trained mercenary force of expendables, not a bunch of rowdy outlaw bikers. Perception management. Playing one hand against the other.

Brightman was sweating and breathing hard by that point. He just shook his head. “Slaughter…please listen to me,” he said, trying it once again. “This woman is ill. She is delirious. She’s talking fantasy. Please! Use your head.”

Slaughter went over to Isley and cut her loose. “You’re coming with me.”

“I can’t. I’m infected. But…if you help me,” she said, tottering uneasily. “I think I can help you.”

He led her from the room and behind him Brightman was screaming hysterically: “SLAUGHTER! GODDAMMIT, SLAUGHTER! YOU LET ME OUT OF HERE! YOU CUT ME LOOSE! DO YOU HEAR ME? YOU GODDAMN FUCKING NO GOOD SHIT-EATING FUCKING BIKER TRASH! YOU CUT ME LOOSE!”

Slaughter led her down the corridor using his flashlight. He called out for Apache Dan but there was no reply. A sense of dread began to move through him. They came to a door with a digital lock. Isley punched a code and it opened to a plush office with leather chairs and an antique desk, impressionist paintings on the walls, and a wet bar. Very nice. Very cozy.

“This was Colonel Krigg’s office,” she said. “He’s dead. He was one of the first that the reanimates fed upon.”

“Okay. How can you help me?”

She fell into a chair, seemingly barely conscious by that point. She told him there was something behind the paneling. He gripped its edges and it swung out. A safe. A big floor safe.

“Open it,” she said, telling him the combination.

He did as she asked and the only thing in the safe was what looked to be an aluminum box with a keypad and a digital display. He hefted it out, discovering that it weighed easily eighty pounds or more. He slid it across the floor.

“What is it?”

She blinked her eyes. “It is a sub-kiloton weapon.”

“What?”

“A tactical nuclear device.”

Slaughter stepped away from it, keeping his light on it. *“A fucking suitcase nuke?”*

“Yes. Colonel Krigg planned on activating it if the Army came for him. He wanted to go out in a big way. He stole it in the early days of the

Outbreak. Now you will activate it. You'll have enough time to escape."

"And you?"

"There's no point in me escaping, now is there?"

She was right and he knew it. But a nuke. A fucking nuke. *Why not, man? Why the hell not? This fucking fortress and what it contains is a blight on the landscape, a fucking cancer. You want to erase it and the wormboys who call it home, then this is the way. Good-bye Cannibal Corpse Nation. Do it for Red Eye. Do it for the shit you've been put through. Do it for the lies you've been fed and the corrupt puppet masters that have been pulling your strings and have cost the lives of your brothers.*

"All right," he said. "Tell me what to do."

She told him a code and he punched it in. A digital display beeped and read: ARMED AND READY. She gave him another twenty digit code and he punched it in. A shrill alarm sounded and a plastic catch popped open on the display. There was a green button behind it.

"Arm it," she said. "You'll have sixty minutes. That's it. One hour to move your people out of here."

Sweat running down his face, Slaughter pressed the button.

The alarm shrilled again.

The display read: 59:58.

"You'd better go, Mr. Slaughter."

Slaughter grabbed his shotgun and Gurkha knife. His palms were so sweaty he could barely hold onto them. He put the light on Katherine Isley but she was gone…no, not dead, but worse: she was moving, twisting, her mouth peeling open in something almost like a blood snarl. And her face… bulging, contorting, rippling with motion just beneath the skin. As he watched, the worms started coming out of her. From her mouth, her nose, even her eyes. Not maggots because this woman was surely not dead and decomposing. These were the red worms. The resurrection worms and she was alive with them. They started tunneling out of her face, pushing out, scarlet and slicked with fluids.

Just like the girl on that video from the compound in Wisconsin.

But Isley was living and that meant breeders were not always corpses, but living human beings.

Not that this jewel of wisdom mattered one bit, for the digital display on the nuke read: 58:43.

And counting…

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Shotgun in one hand and *Kukri* in the other, Slaughter raced down the corridor shouting out for Apache Dan because time had never, ever in his life been so unbelievably goddamn dear. But the corridor was long and there were so damn many rooms and offices and as he ran along he could see that digital readout in the back of his head counting down to doomsday and hear that alarm shrilling in his ears.

Jesus. There just wasn't time.

They had to get gone.

"APACHE!" he cried out at the very top of his lungs. "APACHE! MOTHERFUCKER, WE GOT TO MOVE! WE GOT TO GET OUT OF HERE!"

But the very quality of his voice as it echoed down that lonesome corridor told him that Apache Dan would never answer. Dread deepened in him. Where before it felt like a surgical cut at the base of his belly, now it was yawning wide and becoming a deep and hurting wound that could have swallowed him alive in a coveting and formless blackness of despair. Apache Dan and he went way back, way, *way* back and it was these memories that assailed him, weakened him, slowing his running feet to a clumsy thudding of motorcycle boots on dusty hardwood flooring.

He called out the name of his brother again, but without any true force behind it. It was like there was no breath in his lungs: *"Apache? Apache?"*

He stumbled on down the corridor, unsure then if he'd been moving down it for a minute or an hour or a minute that had been *squeezed* into an hour. His mouth was dry, his skin sweaty and cool. His hair was damp and his limbs felt rubbery. He remembered at that precise moment that he had not felt like this since he was a kid and had to cross the lavender-curtained parlor of the funeral home to look down at his mother lying in that long polished box.

And he was not feeling that way again for no reason.

There was an open door at the end of the corridor and he knew very well what would be in that room. God, how he knew it. *Go ahead, Johnny. Go take a look at death and know the pain it inspires and the bleak finality it lays upon the soul like an iron door clanging shut that will never, ever be opened again.*

Enough. He would not be ruled by fear and regret and channeled guilt.

He looked in the room.

Apache Dan's corpse was flopped in a pool of ever-spreading blood that was so darkly red it was nearly black. He sucked in a sharp breath. It was as he had expected, except for the fact that his brother's head was missing and that was the final indignity of his mortification and degradation.

A frozen terror spread out inside him, chilling all it touched, and he felt like an ice sculpture waiting to melt. His life had not been a good one when you put it under the microscope and dissected it layer by layer. There was suffering and pain. There had been hunger and squalor as a child and petty crime as a teenager followed by violence and murder, drug dealing and misery as an adult, years of incarceration in brutal hardtime joints. And all he'd ever really had through the sad roll of those latter years was his brothers, his patched brothers, the Devil's Disciples. They were his equilibrium, his support system, his sanity. The cool water in his throat and the hot food in his belly. The hands to clasp and the shoulders to bear his weight.

Gone now.

All gone.

Because he knew, God how he knew, that Moondog was gone, too. It had been that crazy death-happy bastard's plan from the beginning to ride the War Wagon into his own personal blood-drenched biker heaven of Valhalla. He was gone. Apache Dan was gone. Shanks, Irish, Fish, and probably Jumbo, too.

"I'm sorry, my brother," he said. "I'm so sorry."

He turned back into the heavy silence of the corridor and breathed deep its air, which was stale and dusty, almost gritty in his throat. Okay. Okay. Time to go, But then—

Thud, thud, thump-thump-thump.

What the fuck?

He stepped around the final bend of the corridor, playing his light around. He saw a set of steps and then something came thudding down them: Apache's head. Sure, over-the-top, high melodrama and Grand Guignol, but wasn't it almost to be expected? The head hit the landing and rolled to a stop and other than seeing its whipping blue-black locks, Slaughter did not look at it; there was no point.

He stepped closer to the landing.

He sucked in great whooping gasps of stale air which carried a sickly-sweet after-odor of putrefaction to it. It was getting so the smell of death was the rule rather than the exception.

A peal of chilling laughter drifted down from the landing high above.

The sound of it was telling, for it was the sort of laughter that would echo through subterranean depths and from the dripping hollows of midnight tombs. He went rigid, absolutely rigid, as he brought the beam of the flashlight up to reveal the crooked form that waited at the top of those crooked stairs.

The laughter again.

And in Slaughter, the mourning and grief and self-recrimination of this entire haphazard, perfectly fucked-up affair was shelved, and he felt hatred to his marrow and the need for payback to his core. He didn't know who or what was up there but he was going after them, he was going to gut them, he was going to stuff them, he was going to mount their gamey ass on a fucking wall, so help him God. So as he charged up those stairs and that crooked shape retreated, he felt like he was put together out of heat and electricity; voltage looking for something to fry. In essence, about 110% pure undiluted death.

At the top, he saw the crooked figure, its back to him. He had the light on it and he saw the three-piece patch very clearly: the fanged skull in its pool of red, that single bloodshot eye staring out at him. The upper rocker: CANNIBAL CORPSE, M/C. And the lower: KANSAS CITY.

His blood ran hot.

The figure turned.

Death and resurrection hadn't been exactly kind to Reptile. He had been a big, strapping fellow bulging with muscle and attitude, death kept at a low simmer in his black eyes…but now he was shrunken, leathery like brown hide, his face looking a little too much like the logo on the back of his denim vest: a skull covered in papery flesh like poorly dried papier mache,

a living deathshead aswarm with red beetles that chewed and tunneled and devoured the thin scraps of face-meat that were left. His eyes were dun pockets of pestilence lidded by gray flaps, his bare chest crudely stitched like a stuffed Sunday chicken.

The beetles had been busy, as had the worms, for in the end the worm conquered all…even this walking heap of grave matter. White bones extruded from his chest, black bloodgrease bubbling from open wounds. His mouth was a blackened corpse-grin that extended ear to ear in a ghoulish smirk. Dead insects dropped from his tongue as he spoke: “Well, lookee here, it’s Johnny Slaughter, prez of the mother chapter of the Devil’s Disciples. Another one for my collection.” He laughed, coughing out a dustball sputum of carapaces. “I think it’s just you and me, Johnny. Now that old Apache Daniel went to meet his maker. But don’t let that eat your guts, prez, because I did it quietly, just like I did the other Disciples. Apache never knew he was dead until his head bounced over the floor.”

Slaughter, feeling a mixture of repulsion, pity, and razor-edged hatred, flipped the *Kukri* in his fist, sheathing it expertly like a gunslinger slipping his Navy Colt into its scabbard. He racked the pump on the Mossberg.

“Man you came to meet is up above, but you’ll never get there, Johnny,” Reptile said, seething with a blackness that was death fermented in its own vile juices and maybe even something *beyond* death. “I think you’re gonna scream, Disciple. I think you’re gonna scream real loud when I eat your soul.”

Slaughter brought the shotgun up. “Then quit jawing, Reptile, and slither on over here.”

Reptile made a sound that he probably thought was laughter but sounded more like a scream echoing up an elevator shaft. And then he moved. He was in rough condition and Slaughter did not expect much and that’s why he was shocked: because Reptile did not shamble towards him with a slow and drunken zombie crawl, he exploded, he filled the air like chain lightning and blooming black smoke, flesh and motion and Jack-in-the-Box surprise, a raging carrion gelatin smear in the air that got within about six inches of the shotgun barrel before Slaughter squeezed the trigger and his head was atomized into a spray of pink-black mucilage that sprayed against the wall with the tinkling of pellets.

The head was gone.

The forward momentum of the body struck Slaughter and flattened him, knocked the wind from him, but he gathered himself quickly enough and kicked himself free of the carrion.

He wondered how much time was left before the nuke pissed death to the four winds.

He decided he didn't really care.

Because up above, that's where Coffin was waiting and he had a pretty good idea by then that he would wear a black hat.

* * *

Now it comes to a close.

Now the beginning seeks its end.

Now the circle closes and in closing, nooses itself tight.

It didn't take Slaughter long to find the stairs that could only lead to the roof and he took them slowly, calmly, the threat of thermonuclear annihilation like some fairy tale he'd heard long ago and never really believed. In his mind were feelings and sensations that went far beyond the mere five and into another realm, an undiscovered country that was part terror, part revelation, and pure fission.

He could feel Coffin waiting for him.

More so, he could feel what hid behind Coffin: an entity in a black hat who described his kingdom in bones and ashes and wrote his name in a blood mist upon the marrow of the sky again and again like a silly, bored, and sadistic child obsessed by its own identity:

The name rang out in his head and he feared its echo, its discord, its resonance. But as he feared it he knew that ultimately in some small and possibly insignificant way that it feared him, too. Had it not once called him a favored son? Maybe that was in the whirlpool apparitional phantasmagoria of a peyote dream, but he still felt that it had weight. Black Hat had shown him a future that was an atomic Armageddon wasteland of skeletons and blowing dust and cities that were graveyards. He claimed that was the end of the game, that Slaughter himself would have a hand in it and there was a certain truth in that as death ticked away downstairs, only it would not play out exactly as Leviathan had hoped, just as nothing from the beginning of this sordid little mess had played out the way Slaughter had expected it.

That was life and destiny and fate intertwined:

Mere puppets they, who come and go
At bidding of vast formless things

Yes, that was it, for even spoilers bleed and gods die and demons themselves are caught in the web of forever, the lathe of cosmic eternity and resolution and chaos.

As he moved up those steps, he felt Coffin and Black Hat and Nemesis and Leviathan, that destroyer of worlds. But he felt something more than

that. It was thrumming through him. Nemesis. Leviathan. A discarnate death entity that had built its house bone by bone and corpse by corpse and skull by skull, a castle then, a cathedral of the dead and the damned where this abomination might walk in tomblike malignant grandeur, his monolithic eyes sweeping over the vast charnel empire he had built with the help of stupid men with brilliant minds who had handed him the trump card that he had longed for in the form of a weaponized biological death: the resurrection worms. He had called to them in their vanity and animal aggression from his den of bone-picked darkness and they had heeded the summons. The worms rained from heaven's split flesh and the dead rose in tomb legions, cavorting and feasting and spreading the pall of death and giving unto him their burnt offerings which were the souls of the innocent which he craved and the worshipful adoration of graveyard faces which he ached for. His realm was no longer some interdimensional sucking black hole of mausoleum delight but an entire world, a world given unto him like a sacrificed firstborn, a world remade into death, an ossuary without border.

This is what Slaughter felt and knew and understood.

Leviathan was vain.

He had been for so long reviled. Hated.

Now he was worshipped by the risen.

Humanity was desecrated by its oldest enemy and somebody, somehow, somewhere, needed to put an end to Leviathan's little evil playground.

So his favored son moved up the steps with killing and cessation in mind and nothing could stop him.

* * *

When Slaughter stepped out onto the rooftop and smelled the night air and felt the billowing heat of human corpse-candles burning high above him and dripping their clotted wax, he saw that he was in a nest of zombies. The rooftops of the NORAD fortress were roughly the size of a mall parking lot and the dead were crowded there, waiting for him. How to take in the living dead in ranks of rot and ruin, crumbling things and slime-oozing things and upright skeletons and yellow-eyed cadavers? He looked at the rows of his enemies, the members of Cannibal Corpse in their colors, in various states of dissolution. But amongst them, oh yes, Ratbags of the Red Hand—alive and uninfected, it seemed—that hadn't gone on the spit.

They all held rifles and every last one was trained on Slaughter as the mannequin dead ringed him in, trying to suffocate him with their boneyard stenches. He offered no resistance as those bloated white hands like clown gloves held him in place.

The crowds parted and here was Coffin and he did indeed wear a Black Hat that he removed and tipped towards his guest with sardonic courtly manner.

“Well, Johnny K. Slaughter,” he said and his voice was like a throat burnt by lye and scratched red by ground glass. “A long road it has been and a deserved end it is, my friend. Did you have a dance with Reptile and did you enjoy it?”

Slaughter didn’t struggle; he was held and that was acceptable for now. “I killed him. I blew his fucking head off and I stamped the worm that crawled out.”

“Well, that’s fine, Johnny. Just fine and peachy.”

“Just like I’m going to do to you, maggot.”

Slaughter stared at Coffin. The others did not exist. They were only part of him. This was Coffin. This was the piece of shit that had ordered the death of his brothers. This was Death. This was the slimy, crawling casket-worm that crept through the hair of corpses and adorned itself with tubes of gut and swam through rivers of poisoned blood and tunneling through shattered anatomies and dancing in the flayed skins of children, gnawing on organs and fondling the severed breasts of mothers and sisters and daughters uncounted.

Death laid bare.

Coffin was dressed in typical 1%er chic: black jeans and motorcycle boots. He wore a black leather vest with no shirt beneath. He was a bloated walking torso, a sun-swollen fish that was gutted then stitched back together…poorly. It looked like his arms and legs had been pulled off and then shoved back in their sockets. Everything was out-of-sync. He was bulging with corpse-gas and pockets of larva like there were innumerable hungry ghosts just beneath the skin trying to push their way out. His eyes were dead suns sinking into pockets of blood, his face was pocked and pitted and riven with tiny holes as if nails had been pounded into it, the flesh cold dead white, crosshatched by intensive suturing to hold it together. The lower lip was gone, the upper swollen thick as an engorged leech, the teeth stained pink. He was so pale he was luminously white, yet it looked

like he had been peeled, his flesh regenerating itself not as a smooth cutaneous membrane but in ropy corded strands of gut.

He laughed at Slaughter, slow and deadly, brushing strands of coal-black hair from his distorted face. “Ha, ha. Don’t worry about that worm, Johnny. Always more where that came from, always more.” And as if offering proof, three or four of them slid from the holes in his face and dropped writhing to his boots. “Right now you’re thinking, if I can just shed these deadheads long enough to get at my shotgun or that .45 on my belt, I’ll blow this fucker’s head clean off. End of story. Only, see, Johnny, it won’t be the end of the story but the beginning of a new chapter and you ain’t gonna like the story it tells.”

Slaughter just stared and waited. It was coming. What he was waiting for, oh yes, it was most surely coming.

“Too bad about your Disciples, Johnny. You had some good boys. Apache Dan. He would have made a good Cannibal. Too bad he wasted his life with shiteaters and rat-suckers like the Disciples. I hear my boys took out Irish. Glad to know it. Fish is gone, Shanks is dead, and you know damn well that Moondog went out with a bang. Like I said, too bad.”

Baiting him. That’s all this was. It could be nothing more. The death of Moondog came as no real surprise, of course. The only thing he didn’t know and would never know is if Moondog couldn’t get out of the War Wagon in time or if he just decided to ride it straight into hell. He favored the latter because that was exactly how Moondog would have wanted it to end.

“The thing I love about you, Johnny, is that you’re so fucking predictable,” Coffin said, uttering that horrible laugh, his long pale fingers lightly brushing the bulging pockets and sacs of his face, all of which seemed to be moving. His eyes were pink, juicy meat. “I wanted you here on the roof so I had Reptile do Apache, knowing that you’d have to come. You’d have to come to right the wrong against your club. Ha, ha. I love that about you, Johnny. That misplaced, convoluted sense of honor. I knew you’d come here to this place and you did. I knew you’d bring meaty sacrifices of your own Disciples and goddamned if you didn’t.”

Slaughter kept breathing evenly and deeply.

He could not let Coffin scent what he was feeling, because there was terror, great shivering amounts of terror. He knew at that moment in the greater scheme of things that everything that had led up to this moment had

been neither accidental nor coincidental; it was planned. All planned out. Probably from the moment he killed those two cops in New Castle. He had been baited every step of the way and he had taken the bait offered. Taken it? No, he had *jumped* for it, sinking his teeth into it, enjoying every bite. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Coffin had wanted not only him but offerings of the very things that meant the most to him: his brother Disciples.

That was the definition of true sacrifice: the offering of that which you loved best and by your own hand.

Slaughter thought of the dream.

That hag-face rising up and then that voice, that terrible, terrible voice speaking prophecy on the dead wind: *We're waiting for you, Disciple, for you have been named. We're all waiting for you,* she had said. *Out here. Out in the west. Out in the Deadlands and cemeteries and the tombs of men, in narrow boxes and seeping charnel depths, we wait for you. Come unto us, Disciple. Bring us our burnt offerings and our racks of meat prepared by thine own hand—*

Yes, it was there and it always had been.

The answers he sought were most simple: he was a puppet carefully manipulated and his brother Disciples were nothing but fucking offerings to this obscenity, to Coffin/Nemesis/Black Hat/Leviathan.

"I got a little present for you, Johnny."

A group of Cannibal Corpse zombies dragged a man out. He was handcuffed, gagged, ankles tied together. They dumped him at Coffin's feet. It was Jumbo. He was gagged, his eyes wild and pissed-off.

Slaughter tried to break free but he was held firmly.

"I want you to watch how Disciples die, Johnny," Coffin said. "I want you to see your last boy flip patches."

The zombies dragged Jumbo to his feet and he looked through the crowd at Slaughter and there was no hatred or recrimination in his eyes. There was only a look that signified friendship. *We ride hard and we die hard, John. That's why they call us the Devil's Disciples.* Slaughter felt something breaking open inside him. A blackness filled his guts and clouded his skull and it was the blinding blackness of sheer hate.

As Jumbo was held, Coffin pulled a looping red worm from one of the holes in his face and dangled it over Jumbo's lips. Jumbo thrashed his head back and forth, a sweat breaking out on his face, but finally they held him so tightly he could not move so much as an inch.

“Welcome to Cannibal Corpse,” Coffin said and dropped the worm on Jumbo’s face, grinning as it slid up his nostril.

They dropped Jumbo and he convulsed on the ground for some time. Before he disappeared back into the greedy hands of the crowding undead, Coffin had one more indignity for him. He pulled out a knife and slit the colors off his leather vest. The violation and degradation were complete.

Or were they?

For now there was no knife in Coffin’s hand. There was a flat-black branding iron, the branding head of which glowed red.

Slaughter wanted to scream, but there was no point.

The Cannibals yanked Jumbo’s shirt and vest up until a nice wide expanse of back was revealed. The flesh sizzled as the branding iron burnt deep and sure. And then Jumbo was marked:

“Man, Johnny,” Coffin said. “I can’t wait to brand you. You have no idea how much I’m gonna enjoy it.”

Regardless of what evil possessed Coffin now, he was still a Cannibal Corpse at his dark core and what he had done, right in front of the president of the mother chapter of the Devil’s Disciples, was basically ritual defilement.

Slaughter knew it had all been staged to weaken him and break him down on some essential level. And it had done that, all right, at least for a few moments. Now the hate was back and it owned him, it clung to his back like a monkey, it squatted in his belly in a hot mass of boiling tar. It was a grinning, toothy goblin in his head and it was hungry. It was very hungry.

Coffin held a large leather book in his hand now.

Slaughter knew it was *The Book of Hell.* There was no mistaking it. “Too bad about Jumbo,” Coffin said. “But his name is written in here. As is *yours*, Johnny K. Slaughter.”

“Any time you’re ready, maggot.”

Coffin laughed. “Ah, yes. You know what comes next, don’t you, Johnny? Oh yes, you know. Now we fight. But not with guns, we fight with blades. Because hasn’t that always been your secret death wish fantasy?”

Slaughter could not deny that. He had dreamed of killing Coffin countless times and it had never, ever been with anything as impersonal as a gun. It was always with a knife. And each and every time he had gutted him and let him a die a slow, agonizing death.

“You wanna kill me, Johnny? Kill me? *Kiiiiiillllll me?* Yes, that’s good. That’s the way it needs to happen. I knew I could count on you. Right from the beginning, I knew.” Coffin laughed. “So predictable. But that’s good and that’s fine. You’re maybe the only man left who can kill me, Johnny. The others are afraid. But not you. Never you.”

“So let’s get to it.”

“You dreams are mine, Johnny,” Coffin told him, still uttering that terrible laugh as if he knew the punchline to a wonderful joke. “I’m going to gut you, Disciple. Then I’m going to eat your still-beating heart. Then I’ll take your soul.”

Slaughter was released as Coffin produced a machete.

Pulling the *Kukri* from its sheath, Slaughter said, “If you could have taken it, you would have by now…*maggot.”*

Then it wasn’t Coffin facing him but Black Hat. He smiled like a well-polished skull. “Well played, biker boy. Indeed. Well played.”

Then it was Coffin again and it began.

They circled each other like blood-hungry animals in a cage and that’s essentially what they were, each scoping out the other as experienced fighters will do, looking for weak spots, advantages. Slaughter saw many with Coffin because the dead man was barely held together by catgut and wire. But that did not mean he was not dangerous because he was, he most certainly was.

Then Coffin moved.

He went after Slaughter with a couple of quick slashes, feigning moves more than anything else to draw him out, but Slaughter didn’t bite. He’d taken too much bait by that point. He would take no more. He moved around and around as quick as he could, going faster and faster, trying to force Coffin into something and it worked: Coffin let out a war cry and came at him, slashing wildly. Slaughter barely got out of the way of the

blade. He ducked and darted, then swung the Gurkha knife. He caught Coffin across the ribs and freed some wriggling parasites but that was about it.

Coffin barely seemed to notice.

He changed his strategy. From gentle probing he went for an all-out vicious assault and Slaughter was taken aback at how quickly he moved, how fast and powerful and almost athletic he was for something that had crawled from a grave. He came on swinging and slashing and Slaughter was kept ducking and dipping, looking for an opening and trying to keep from getting cut. When Coffin swung at his head, the force carrying him around in a half-circle, Slaughter seized the opportunity and brought the *Kukri* down on his forearm. It was a quick, glancing blow but the razored blade of the Gurkha knife peeled Coffin's left forearm to bone.

What Slaughter didn't expect was that even a cut like that didn't make Coffin hesitate. He brought the machete back with maximum thrust and Slaughter avoided the blade, but the arm that held it cracked him in the side of the head and dropped him to the ground.

The Cannibals roared with glee.

Coffin made to stomp him and was successful with three good ones that brought serious pain to Slaughter, but with the fourth stomp he kicked out and caught Coffin's ankle and the snap of the bone was loud and clear. Hobbled, Coffin staggered back.

Slaughter jumped to his feet.

Coffin made with a few defensive arcs of the blade, but Slaughter came on with renewed fury and took the Cannibal Corpse leader's hand off at the wrist and slashed his belly open.

"Nice move, Johnny," he said, gesturing at him with a wrist-stump that pissed a purple-gray fluid. The stump cauterized itself with a sizzling sound and a nauseating odor of burnt skin. Coffin was holding his guts in place with his knife hand. Then the wound cauterized itself, too, and Coffin went at it again. He swung the machete and Slaughter ducked down and hacked Coffin's bad ankle with the blade of the *Kukri.*

And if the undead could know pain, Coffin knew it: he let out a raging shrill howl.

His gait was uneven now, but he was far from finished. He went after Slaughter with the machete and Slaughter caught a good gash on the shoulder but gave Coffin two more deep stabs. Before they could begin

cauterizing he jumped up and sliced Coffin's face open, taking one of his eyes out and freeing pockets of gushing black drainage. Coffin lashed out and Slaughter brought the *Kukri* down and took off his knife hand and then, just missing Coffin's head, sank the blade about three inches into his shoulder.

But Coffin still came on, battering Slaughter in the face with his stumps. His blade still wedged deeply into the zombie, Slaughter punched him in the stomach and felt his fist sink into a pocket of pulpy tissue. Coffin hammered him with his right stump and Slaughter nearly went down. He pitched to the side and Coffin got behind him, putting a headlock on him and yanking him backwards with brutal force. Slaughter let out a cry and brought the heel of his right motorcycle boot up into Coffin's crotch were it mashed his spongy genitals to sauce. Then he reached back, pivoted, and flipped Coffin over his shoulder.

With the impact, the Gurkha knife came free and Slaughter dove for it. A pair of Cannibals tried to get to it before him and he bowled them over, coming up with the knife.

"Come on, Johnny," Coffin said, gouts of cherry-red juice spilling from his mouth. "Show me what you got."

So Slaughter did just that.

He brought the *Kukri* to play, hacking at Coffin's face until it came apart in a wet vomit of skullbone and gurgling raw blood matter. Then it was time to finish him and as he stepped forward to do that, things started to happen. Coffin's entire body, damaged and stitched, slashed open and steaming with spilling fluids, began to move with a writhing vermiform motion like it was trying to crawl free of the bone beneath. He was like a hissing hot gas swamp of tissue, boiling and bubbling, letting out geysers of searing steam.

Slaughter fell back and away.

He wanted to take Coffin's head off, but he didn't dare get too close. Coffin's was like a shadow box thrown open, splitting, stitches popping, creeks of blood and brain matter pouring forth along with an oozing yolky excrescence of brilliant red gore. It was liquiform and plastic, melting and running like tallow, sputtering like hot grease. It showed Slaughter faces—Dirty Mary and the Skeleton Man, the Mad Hatter and Black Hat, Coffin and Reptile, Frank Feathers and Indiana, too many to properly catalog. Then it began to dissolve, not like acid was eating into it but as if it were being eaten away by flesh-eating bacteria in fast, hyper-fast motion.

Then, before it got any worse, Slaughter took Coffin's head off with a fierce swing.

And a voice in his head, that of Black Hat said, *Good work, biker boy. Well-played and well-met. Long have I been earthbound in this ragged hide and now you've set me free. Blessed be the name of John Slaughter who birthed death unto the world of men. Blessed be my favorite son and beloved puppet. Now, now comes the time of re-birth. Now comes the moment of regeneration—*

And what followed was something Slaughter never expected.

There was a sudden rising of heat like a blast from a seething coke oven and the surviving members of the Red Hand cried out as a searing spontaneous combustion rose up and Slaughter went to his knees thinking the nuke had just been triggered. But it wasn't that, it was something else. All the zombies began to burn…no, *melt.* Like plastic army men some kid had decided to torch, they superheated and ran like hot fat, liquefying into a violent, slopping sea of putrescence that rolled across the rooftop, scattering Ratbags into the soup. It was like the spilled cauldron of a witch: a rising flesh and blood and offal stew bobbing with bones.

And then a wind blew clean the gaseous stink of fetid decay and rotten meat and bile and blood and shit. Slaughter slipped in the greasy sea of zombie sludge and got to one knee and saw something like wriggling ectoplasmic threads rise up from the organic sluicing profusion and form an immense and jellied clot of coiling, bubbling motion that bobbed over the rooftop like a hot air balloon. But it was no balloon; it was an obscene fleshy entity that was fetal and gelatinous. An embryonic rushing storm of plasmic life seeding itself, filling and rupturing and fattening and throwing out unformed limbs and feelers and licking black tongues before giving birth to an immense and fragmenting ghost-face which was the face of the hag, the death-hag of Slaughter's dreams: that fissured graveyard countenance of white corpse-pulp whose hair was fluttering red corpse worms and whose eyes were glistening ruby crystals. Her mouth peeled open and a hot cremating wind blew forth with a freight train roar.

This was the Queen of the Dead.

The bloated white leech that fed upon death and decay.

The thing that hid in the saprogenic depths of Coffin, the true and discarnate evil that was Nemesis and Leviathan and thousands of other nameless and unnamable haunters of the dark to a thousand disparate

cultures. Yes, this was the wind demon Pazuzu, the bringer of hot winds of pestilence; it was Uggae, the ten-headed Babylonian personification of rage and graveyards and murder; it was Hebrew Lilith strangling infants in their cribs and feeding upon their pink souls; it was Choronzon, the black fire of hatred, the udders of the cat of slime, the terror of the darkness that crawls upon the sands of Hell; it was Greek Eurynomis, the corpse-eater, flashing its carrion grin and spreading night-black vulture's wings, its body swollen blue and black like that of corpse-fly. Yes, Canaanite Baalberith and Leviathan, the gatekeeper, the Hell-mouth.

Slaughter was impotent before her.

All men were.

Her mouth continued to open until it was a black storm mouth, a vortex of howling wind, and that face was no longer a face but a tornadic eruption of resurrection worms that fell over the rooftop in a hail of undulant squirming that overflowed the zombie sea and became not inches deep, but *feet.*

Slaughter knew it was coming because he had seen something similar in his dream.

So by the time the worm-mouth vomited its larva over the world, he was already crawling through the sea of putrefaction and to the door that led below. He barely made it. Even as the surviving Ratbags cried out as the worms tunneled into them by the hundreds and thousands, he pulled them out of his hair and off his vest and out of his beard, smashing them on the stone steps.

And then he was running.

* * *

The thermonuclear funeral couldn't have been much more than minutes away, if not seconds. He made his way down the stairs and ran down the long corridor, making for the passage that would lead him to the second floor. As a voice in his head told him he would never make it, he found the stairs and half-ran, half-stumbled down them. He saw no zombies. He saw no anything. Then he made the ground floor. It was filled with rolling black smoke and hot with the spreading fire. He had to go to the floor in a crab-crawl to get some breathable air.

He scrambled down the corridor until he saw the bikes left by himself and Apache Dan. The gas tank of Moondog's Boss Hoss was hot enough to fry an egg on. He sheathed the *Kukri* and started it up. Before him was a barrier of flame but he had no choice as he saw it. He circled back around and used the length of the corridor to pick up speed.

The roar of the hog was immense.

The building was trembling.

The flames were rising and spreading.

He cracked open the throttle and took that corridor wide open, flying right into the flames, into the burning cauldron of fire, and then he was out of it, going right through the front door and jumping the hog off the steps, airborne right over the flaming wreckage of the War Wagon and coming down in the drive and nearly stacking the bike right there as the forks tried to twist away from him.

But he got it under control, hammering down and soaring through the gates and down the long drive coming in, the bike bouncing over potholes and the ruts of the old tire traps and the pavement was right before him and he squealed onto it, nearly losing it, then cracking open the throttle again and eating it foot by foot. He flogged her down the road, up hills and down into little valleys, and then up onto higher ground again, the pavement twisting and turning through night-dark fields lit only by the white blade of the hog's headlight.

The straight pipes were roaring and the wind was in his face and he was caning the hog, reaching out for the big end and ripping it wide open. About the time he figured he'd carved a mile between himself and the NORAD complex, the tactical nuke went up with a rumbling/crackling/thundering noise that was deafening and a flash of light that was at his back but still blinded him.

He slowed the bike, trying to avoid the shock wave.

But it hit him as he was braking down to less than ten miles an hour. The shock wave hit him, tossing the bike, surfing it across the pavement in a shower of sparks and he was flipped into the gravel and then into a ditch of cattails and stagnant water.

When he pulled himself out, the heat wave had passed.

The fields around him were burning. There was smoke and fire and embers in the wind. He dragged himself out of the water, pulling bits of gravel from his face and wiping blood and sweat and swamp water free.

He looked back in the direction of the complex and saw it.

He was on a flattened hilltop and he could see the blazing red outlines of the fortress, or the blazing firestorm where it had once been. The sky had gone from black to cobalt to a shimmering atomic green. The fortress had cracked open like an egg and given birth to a huge neon-orange mushroom cloud of energized particles, radioactive dust, and radiant smoke. It was connected to the jagged scar of the bomb site by a smoldering umbilicus. The landscape near it was glowing a phosphorescent yellow. As he watched, he saw something take shape dead-center of the mushroom cloud—a shimmering red grinning skull face that wavered like a heat mirage.

Then it was gone, fading away. Maybe it never was.

“Jesus,” he said.

Leviathan. Regenerated. And you made this happen. You were chosen and you were played. A self-fulfilling prophecy.

Bleeding, bruised, blackened and filthy, he stumbled down the road to the Boss Hoss and lifted it back up, every muscle and tendon in his body crying out. He worried that the electromagnetic pulse of the blast might have fused the wiring, but she turned over just fine.

Slaughter looked back once, feeling the pain of his dead brothers, then cracked open the throttle again, racing against the cloud of fallout that was coming. He opened her up, reaching for the big end, letting her roll on out. He was clipping at better than a hundred miles per hour when, grinning, he hit the button to release the Nitrox boost and the scoot took off like a rocket. The forks came right off the ground and he rode that wheelie hard for a hundred yards and by then nothing could stop him or touch him because he had reached the old fabled double-T, the 200 mile an hour mark.

He was free.

He was riding.

He was in the wind.

His feet up on the Easy Rider pegs, he cut a path deep into the black beating heart of the night and the destiny that belonged to him and him alone.

Maybe Leviathan would show himself again in a new form.

But it wouldn’t be today.

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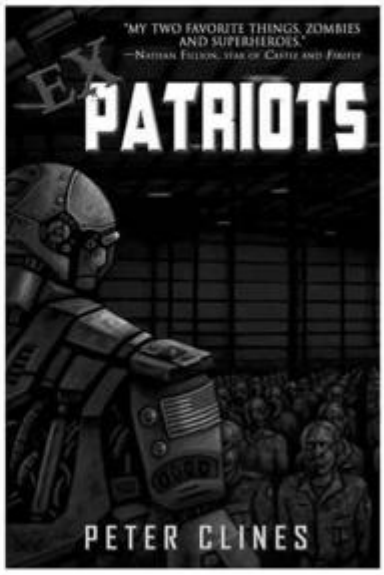

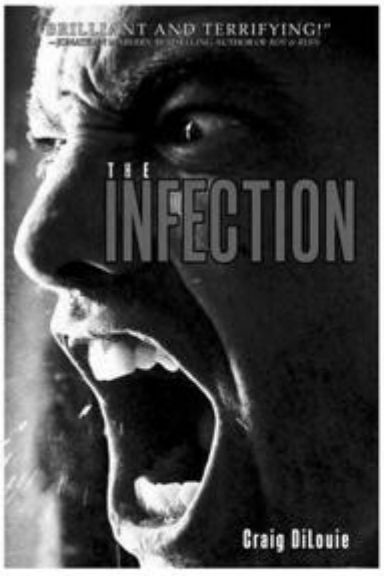

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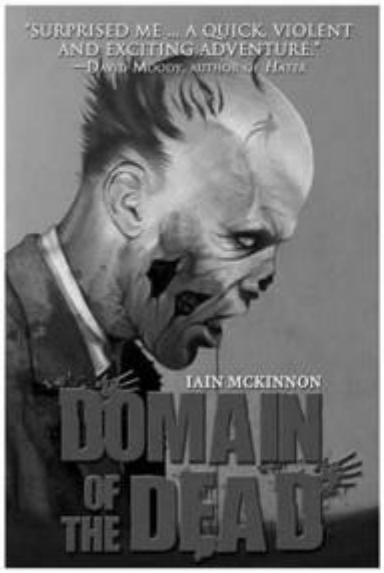

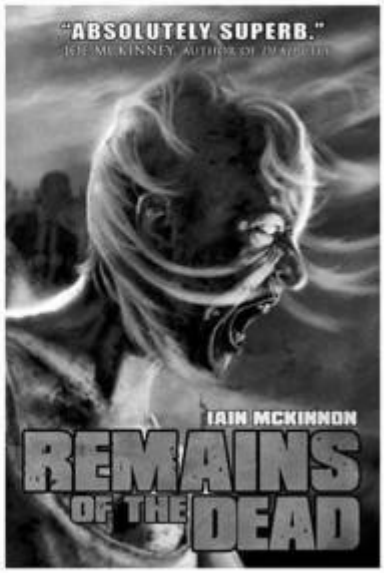

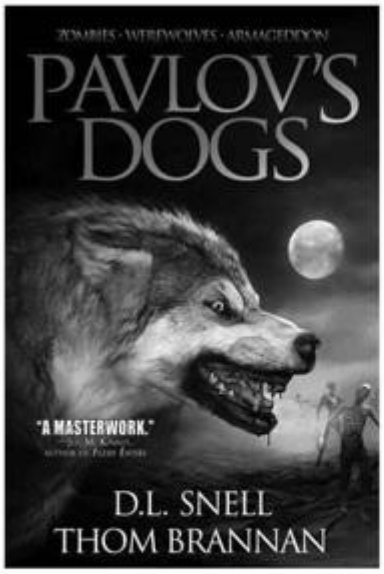

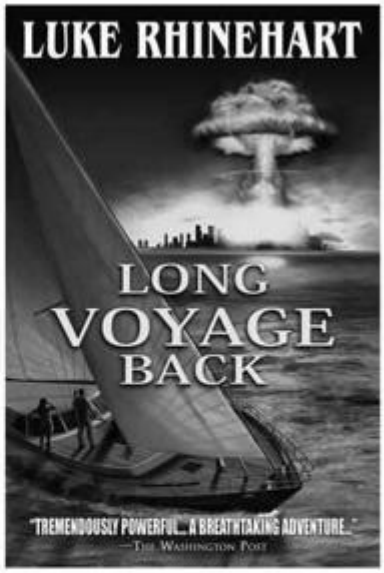

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